

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

marian  
keyes

BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF  
ANGELS



sushi for  
beginners A NOVEL

"We guarantee you'll eat up this red-hot romantic comedy."  
—Cosmopolitan

Prologue

Dammit," she realized. "I think I'm having a nervous breakdown." She looked around at the bed she was flung in. Her well-overdue-for-a-bath body was sprawled lethargically on the well-overdue-for-a-change sheet. Tissues, sodden and balled, littered the duvet. Gathering dust on her chest of drawers was an untouched arsenal of chocolate. Scattered on the floor were magazines she'd been unable to concentrate on. The television in the corner relentlessly delivered daytime viewing direct to her bed. Yep, nervous breakdown territory all right. But something was wrong. What was it? "I always thought..."she tried. "You know, I always expected..." Abruptly she knew. "I always thought it would be nicer than this..."

1

At Femme magazine, something had been in the air for weeks, a feeling that they were living on a fault line. Speculation finally burst into flames when it was confirmed that Calvin Carter, the U.S. managing director, had been sighted roaming around the top floor, looking for the gents'. Apparently he'd just arrived in London from the head office in New York. It's happening. Lisa clenched her fists in excitement. It's actually finally, bloody happening. Later that day the phone call came. Would Lisa pop upstairs to see Calvin Carter and British managing director Barry Hollingsworth? Lisa slammed down the phone. "Too right I would," she shouted at it. Her colleagues barely looked up. People slamming phones down then shouting were ten a penny in the magazine game. Besides, they were trapped in Deadline Hell— if they didn't get this month's issue put to bed by nightfall, they'd miss their slot with the printers and would be scooped once again by archrivals Marie Claire. But what did she care, Lisa thought, hobbling to the lift, she wouldn't have a job here after today. She'd have a much better one somewhere else. Lisa was kept waiting outside the boardroom for twenty-five minutes. After all, Barry and Calvin were very important men. Should we let her in yet?" Barry asked Calvin, when he felt they'd killed enough time. "It's only twenty minutes since we called her," Calvin pointed out, huffily. Obviously Barry Hollingsworth didn't realize just how important he, Calvin Carter, was. "Sorry, I thought it was later. Perhaps you'd show me again how to improve my swing." "Sure. Now, head down and hold still. Hold still! Feet steady, left arm straight, and swing!" When Lisa was finally granted admission, Barry and Calvin were seated

behind a walnut table approximately a kilometer long. They looked frowningly powerful. "Sit down, Lisa." Calvin Carter inclined his silver bullet head graciously. Lisa sat. She smoothed back her caramel-colored hair, showing her free honey-colored highlights to their best advantage. Free because she kept plugging the salon in the "Ones to Watch" section of the magazine. Settling herself in the chair, she tucked her Patrick Cox-shod feet neatly around each other. The shoes were a size too small—no matter how many times she asked the Patrick Cox press office to send a size six, they always sent a five. But free Patrick Cox shoes were free Patrick Cox shoes. What did an unimportant detail like excruciating agony matter? "Thank you for coming up." Calvin smiled. Lisa decided she'd better smile back. Smiles were a commodity like everything else, only given in exchange for something useful, but she reckoned in this case it was worth her while. After all, it wasn't every day that a girl was seconded to New York and made deputy editor of Manhattan magazine. So she curled her mouth and bared her pearly-white teeth. (Kept that way from the year's supply of Rembrandt toothpaste that had been donated for a reader competition, but which Lisa had thought would be more appreciated in her own bathroom.) "You've been at Femme for"—Calvin looked at the stapled pages in front of him—"four years?" "Four years next month," Lisa murmured, with an expertly judged mix of deference and confidence. "And you've been editor for nearly two years?" "Two wonderful years," Lisa confirmed, fighting back the urge to stick her fingers down her throat and gag. "And you're only twenty-nine," Calvin marveled. "Well, as you know, here at Randolph Media we reward hard work." Lisa twinkled prettily at this patent lie. Like many companies in the Western world, Randolph Media rewarded hard work with poor pay, increasing workloads, demotions, and on-a-second's-notice redundancies. But Lisa was different. She'd paid her dues at Femme, and made sacrifices that even she'd never intended to make: starting at seven-thirty most mornings, doing twelve-, thirteen-, fourteen-hour days, then going to evening press do's when she finally switched off her computer. Often she came to work on Saturdays, Sundays, even bank-holiday Mondays. The porters loathed her because it meant that whenever she wanted to come to the office one of them had to come in and open up and thereby forgo their Saturday football or their bank-holiday family outing to Brent Cross. "We have a vacancy at Randolph Media," Calvin said importantly. "It would be a wonderful challenge, Lisa." I know, she thought irritably. Just cut to the chase. "It will involve moving overseas, which can sometimes be a problem for one's partner." "I'm single." Lisa was brusque. Barry wrinkled his forehead in surprise and thought of the tenner he'd had to hand over for someone's wedding present a few years before. He

could have sworn it was for Lisa here, but maybe not, perhaps he wasn't as on the ball as he once used to be... "We're looking for an editor for a new magazine," Calvin went on. A new magazine? Lisa was jolted off course. But Manhattan has been published for seventy years. While she was still grappling with the implications of that, Calvin delivered the whammy. "It would involve your relocating to Dublin." The shock set up a smothered buzzing in her head, as if her ears needed to pop. A numb, fuzzy sensation of alienation. The only reality was the sudden agony of her crumpled toes. "Dublin?" She heard her muffled voice ask. Perhaps... perhaps... perhaps they meant Dublin, New York. "Dublin, Ireland," Calvin Carter said, down a long, echoey tunnel, destroying the last of her hope. I can't believe this is happening to me. "Ireland?" "Small wet place across the Irish Sea," Barry offered kindly. "Where they drink a lot?" Lisa said faintly. "And they never stop talking. That's the place. Booming economy, huge population of young folk. Market research indicates the place is ripe for a new feisty women's magazine. And we want you to set it up for us, Lisa." They were looking at her expectantly. She knew it was customary to make stumbling, tearful, overwhelmed noises about how she appreciated how much they trusted her and how she hoped to justify their faith in her. "Um, good... thanks." "Our Irish portfolio is an impressive one," boasted Calvin. "We have Hibernian Bride, Celtic Health, Gaelic Interiors, Irish Gardening, The Catholic Judger—" "No, The Catholic Judger is about to fold," Barry interrupted. "Sales figures are way down." "Gaelic Knitting." Calvin had no interest in bad news. "Celtic Car, Spud—that's our Irish food magazine—DIY Irish Style, and The Hip Hib." "The Hip Hip?" Lisa forced out. It was advisable to keep talking. "Hip Hib," Barry corrected. "Short for Hip Hibernian. Young men's magazine. Cross between Loaded and Arena. You'll be setting up a women's version." "Name?" "We think Colleen. Young, feisty, funky, sexy, that's how we see it. Especially sexy, Lisa. And nothing too clever. Forget downbeat features about female circumcision or women in Afghanistan with no freedom. That's not our target readership." "You want a dumbed-down magazine?" "You got it." Calvin beamed. "But I've never been to Ireland, I know nothing about the place." "Precisely!" Calvin agreed. "That's exactly what we want. No preconceptions, just a fresh, honest approach. Same salary, generous relocation package, you start two weeks Monday." "Two weeks? But that gives me almost no time..." "I hear you've got wonderful organizational powers," Calvin glinted. "Impress me. Any questions?" She couldn't stop herself. Normally she smiled while the knife was being twisted because she could see the bigger picture. But she was in shock. "What about the position of deputy manager at Manhattan?" Barry and Calvin exchanged a look. "Tia Silvano from

The New Yorker was the successful candidate,” Calvin huffily admitted. Lisa nodded. She felt as if her world had ended. Woodenly she got up to leave. “When do I have to decide by?” she asked. Barry and Calvin exchanged another look. Calvin was the one who eventually spoke. “We’ve already filled your current position.” The world lapsed into slow motion as Lisa realized that this was a fait accompli. She had no choice in it at all. Fixed in a frozen scream, she needed several long seconds to understand that there was nothing she could do except hobble from the room. “Fancy a round of golf?” Barry asked Calvin, once she’d gone. “Love to but can’t. Gotta go to Dublin and interview for the other positions.” “Who’s Irish MD now?” Barry asked. Calvin frowned. Barry should know this. “A guy called Jack Devine.” “Oh, him. Bit of a maverick.” “I don’t think so.” Calvin strongly disapproved of rebels. “At least he’d better not be.” Lisa tried to put a gloss on it. She’d never admit she was disappointed. Especially after all she’d sacrificed. But you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. Dublin was not New York, no matter how you sliced it. And the “generous” relocation package could have been sued under the Trade Descriptions Act. Worse still, she had to surrender her mobile. Her mobile! It was as if a limb had been amputated. None of her colleagues were exactly devastated at her departure. She never let anyone else get a go of the Patrick Cox shoes, not even the girls with size-five feet. And her generosity with bitchy and untrue personal comments had earned her the nickname Slanderella. Nevertheless, on Lisa’s last day, the staff of Femme were rounded up and press-ganged into the boardroom for the customary send-off—plastic glasses of tepid white wine that could have doubled as paint stripper, a tray with a desultory spread of Hula Hoops and Skips, and a ru-mor—never realized—that cocktail sausages were on their way. When everyone was on their third glass of wine and could therefore be relied on to exhibit some enthusiasm, there was a call for hush and Barry Hollingsworth made “Hip Hib,” Barry corrected. “Short for Hip Hibernian. Young men’s magazine. Cross between Loaded and Arena. You’ll be setting up a women’s version.” “Name?” “We think Colleen. Young, feisty, funky, sexy, that’s how we see it. Especially sexy, Lisa. And nothing too clever. Forget downbeat features about female circumcision or women in Afghanistan with no freedom. That’s not our target readership.” “You want a dumbed-down magazine?” “You got it.” Calvin beamed. “But I’ve never been to Ireland, I know nothing about the place.” “Precisely!” Calvin agreed. “That’s exactly what we want. No preconceptions, just a fresh, honest approach. Same salary, generous relocation package, you start two weeks Monday.” “Two weeks? But that gives me almost no time...” “I hear you’ve got wonderful organizational powers,” Calvin glinted. “Impress me. Any

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deputy, had chosen the farewell present with care. She'd thought long and hard about what Lisa would hate the most and eventually concluded that M&S vouchers would cause maximum distress. (Ally Benn's feet were a perfect size five.) "To Lisa!" Barry concluded. By then everyone was flushed and rowdy, so they raised their white plastic cups, sloshing wine and morsels of cork onto their clothing and, as they sniggered and elbowed one another, bellowed, "To Lisa!" Lisa stayed just as long as she needed to. She'd long looked forward to this leaving do, but she'd always thought she'd be surfing out on a wave of glory, already halfway to New York. Instead of being shunted away to the magazine version of Siberia. It was an utter nightmare. "I must go," she said to the dozen or so women who'd worked under her for the past two years. "I must finish packing." "Sure, sure," they agreed, in a clamor of drunken good wishes. "Well, good luck, have fun, enjoy Ireland, take care, don't work too hard..." Just as Lisa got to the door, Ally screeched, "We'll miss you." Lisa nodded tightly and closed the door. "Like a hole in the head." Ally didn't miss a beat. "Any wine left?"

## 2

"Ted, you couldn't have come at a better time!" Ash-ling flung wide her door and for once didn't utter her most overused phrase, which happened to be, "Oh shite, it's Ted." "Couldn't I?" Ted sidled cautiously into Ashling's flat. He didn't normally receive a welcome this warm. "I need you to tell me which jacket looks nicest on me." "I'll do my best." Ted's thin, dark face looked even more intense. "But I am a man." Not quite, Ashling thought, regretfully. What a great pity that the person who had moved into the flat upstairs six months ago and had instantly decided that Ashling was his best friend hadn't been a nice, big, pulse-rate-raising man. And instead had been Ted Mullins, needy civil servant, aspiring stand-up comedian, and small and wiry owner of a bicycle. "First, this black one." Ashling shrugged the jacket on over her white silk "interview" top and magic lose-ten-pounds-in-an-instant black trousers. "What's the biggie?" Ted sat on a chair and wound himself around it. He was all angles and elbows, pointy shoulders and sharp knees, like a sketch drawing of himself. "Job interview. Half nine this morning." "Another one! What for this time?" Ashling had applied for several jobs in the past two weeks, everything from working on a Wild West ranch in Mullingar to answering phones at a PR company. "Assistant editor at a new magazine called Colleen." "What? A real job?" Ted's saturnine face lit up. "Beats me why you've applied for all those others, you're way overqualified for them." "I've low self-esteem," Ashling reminded him, with a bright smile. "Mine's lower," Ted shot back, determined not to be outdone. "A women's

magazine, though,” he mused. “If you got it you could tell that crowd at Woman’s Place to stick it. Revenge is a dish best served cold!” He threw back his head and gave forth a hollow series of fake Vincent Price–type laughs. “Nnnnyyywwwahwahwahwahwahwah!”

“Actually, revenge isn’t a dish at all,” Ashling interrupted. “It’s an emotion. Or something. And not worth bothering about.” “But after the way they’ve treated you,” Ted said, in wonderment. “It wasn’t your fault that woman’s couch was ruined!” For more years than she cared to remember, Ashling had worked for Woman’s Place, a weekly, unglossy Irish magazine. Ashling had been the fiction editor, fashion editor, health and beauty editor, handiworks editor, cookery editor, the “Agony Aunt,” the copy editor, and the spiritual advisor all rolled into one. Not as onerous as it sounds, actually, because Woman’s Place was put together according to a very strict, tried-and-tested formula. Each issue had a knitting pattern—almost always for a toilet-roll cover in the shape of a Southern belle. Then there was a cookery page involving purchasing cheap cuts of meat and disguising them as something else. Every issue had a short story featuring a young boy and a grandmother, who were sworn enemies at the start and firm friends by the end. There was the problem page, of course—invariably with a letter complaining about a cheeky daughter-in-law. Pages two and three were an array of “funny” stories starring the readers’ grandchildren and the cutesy things they’d said or done. The back inside cover was a platitudinous letter, supposedly from a clergyman, but always scribbled by Ashling fifteen minutes before the printers’ deadline. Then there were the “readers’ tips.” And one of these was the unlikely instrument of Ashling’s downfall. Readers’ tips were pieces of advice sent in by ordinary moms for the benefit of other readers. They were always about making your money go further and getting something for nothing. Their general premise was that you needn’t buy anything because you could make it yourself from basics already in the home. Lemon juice featured heavily. For example, why buy expensive shampoo when you could fashion your own from some lemon juice and washing-up liquid! You’d like highlights? All you need to do is squeeze a couple of lemons over your hair and sit in the sun. For about a year. And to remove cranberry juice from a beige couch? A mix of lemon juice and vinegar would do the trick. Except it didn’t. Not on the couch of Mrs. Anna O’Sullivan from Co. Waterford. It all went horribly wrong. The cranberry juice became ever more tenacious, so that even a Stain Devil couldn’t budge it. And despite magnanimous usage of Glade, the entire room stank of vinegar. On account of being a good Catholic, Mrs. O’Sullivan was a woman who believed in bloody retribution. She threatened to sue. When Sally Healy, the editor of Woman’s Place, launched an investigation,



Ashling admitted that she'd invented the tip herself. Readers' contributions had been thin on the ground that particular week. "I didn't think anyone actually believed them," Ash-ling whispered, in her defense. "I'm surprised at you, Ashling," Sally said. "You always told me you'd no imagination. And 'Letter from Father Bennett' doesn't count, I know you crib it from The Catholic Judger, which, incidentally—keep it to yourself for the moment—is about to go to the wall." "I'm sorry, Sally, it'll never happen again." "I'm the one who's sorry, Ashling. I'm going to have to let you go." "Because of a simple mistake? I don't believe you!" She was right not to. The real reason was the board of Woman's Place were concerned about the plummeting circulation figures, had decided that the magazine was looking "tired," and were on the hunt for a fall guy. Ash-ling's screwup couldn't have come at a better time. Now they could just sack her instead of having to shell out a redundancy payment. Sally Healy was distraught. Ashling was the most reliable, hardworking employee one could have. She kept the entire place ticking over while Sally came in late, left early, and disappeared for Tuesday and Thursday afternoons to collect her daughter from ballet lessons and her sons from rugby practice. But the board had made it clear that it was either Ashling or her. As a sop to her long years of faithful service, Ashling was allowed to hold on to her job until she got another one. Which, hopefully, would be soon. "Well?" Ashling smoothed out the front of her jacket and turned to Ted. "Fine." Ted's shoulder bones rose and fell. "Or is this one better?" Ashling pulled on a jacket that seemed to Ted to be identical to the first one. "Fine," he repeated. "Which one?" "Either." "Which one makes me look more like I've got a waist?" Ted squirmed. "Not this again. You're obsessed with your waist." "I haven't got one to be obsessed with."

"Why can't you go on about the size of your bum, like normal women do?" Ashling had very little in the way of waist, but, as always with bad news pertaining to oneself, she'd been the last to find out. It wasn't until she was fifteen and her best friend, Clodagh, had sighed, "You're so lucky, having no waist. Mine is tiny and it just makes my bottom look bigger," that she'd made the shocking discovery. While every other girl on her road had spent their teenage years standing in front of a mirror agonizing over whether one breast was bigger than the other, Ashling's focus was lower. Eventually she got herself a Hula-Hoop and set to it with gusto in her back garden. For a couple of months she rotated and whittled, day and night, her tongue stuck earnestly out of the corner of her mouth. All the mummies from the neighboring families looked over their garden walls, their arms folded, nodding knowingly at one another, "She'll have herself Hula-Hooped

into an early grave, that one.” Not that the nonstop, obsessive whirling had made any difference. Even now, sixteen years later, there was still an undeniable straight-up-and-down quality to Ashling’s silhouette. “Having no waist isn’t the worst thing that could happen to someone,” Ted encouraged from the sidelines. “Indeed it isn’t,” Ashling agreed with unsettling joviality. “You could have horrible legs, too. And as luck would have it, I do.” “You don’t.” “I do. I inherited them from my mother. But so long as that’s all I inherited from her,” Ashling added, cheerfully, “I figure I’m not doing so badly.” “I was in bed with my girlfriend last night . . .” Ted was keen to change the conversation. “I told her the earth was flat.” “What girlfriend? And what’s this about the earth?” “No, that’s wrong,” Ted muttered to himself. “I was lying in bed with my girlfriend last night...I told her the earth was flat. Boom boom!” “Ha ha, very good,” Ashling said weakly. The worst thing about being Ted’s favorite person was having to be the guinea pig for his new material. “But can I make a suggestion? How about, I was lying in bed with my girlfriend last night. I told her I’d always love her and never leave her. “Boom boom,” she added wryly. “I’m late,” Ted said. “D’you want a backer?” Often he gave her a lift to work on the back of his bike, en route to his own job at the Department of Agriculture. “No thanks, I’m going in a different direction.” “Good luck with the interview. I’ll pop in to see you this evening.” “I don’t doubt it for a minute,” Ashling agreed, under her breath. “Hey! How’s your ear infection?” “Better, nearly. I can wash my hair myself again.”

3 Ashling eventually decided on jacket number one. She could have sworn she detected a slight indentation roughly halfway between her breasts and her hips and that was good enough for her. After agonizing over her makeup, she went for muted in case she came across as flighty. But in case she looked too drab, she brought her beloved black-and-white pony-skin handbag. Then she rubbed her lucky Buddha, popped her lucky pebble in her pocket, and looked regretfully at her lucky red hat. But just how lucky would a red bobble hat be if worn to a job interview? Anyway, she didn’t need it—her horoscope had said that this would be a good day. So had the angel oracle. As she let herself onto the street she had to step over a man who was sound asleep in the front doorway. Then she pointed herself in the direction of Randolph Media’s Dublin office and, walking briskly past the Dublin city-center gridlock traffic, repeated over and over in her head, as advised by one of her many self-help-books, I will get this job, I will get this job, I will get this job ... But what if I don’t? Ashling couldn’t help but wonder. Well, then I won’t mind, well, then I won’t mind, well, then I won’t mind ... Though she’d put a brave face

on it, Ashling had been devastated by the turn of events with Mrs. O'Sullivan's couch. So devastated that it had triggered one of the ear infections that always showed up when she was under stress. Losing one's job was embarrassingly juvenile, not the kind of thing that happened to a thirty-one-year-old mortgage holder. Surely she should be past all that? To stop her life unraveling she'd been job hunting with a passion and putting herself forward for everything remotely feasible. No, she couldn't lasso a runaway stallion, she'd admitted in her interview for the Wild West ranch in Mullingar—she'd actually thought the position they were interviewing for was an administrative one— but she'd be willing to learn. At each interview she went for she repeated over and over that she was willing to learn. But of everything she'd applied for, the job at Colleen was the one she really, badly wanted. She loved working on a magazine and magazine jobs were rare in Ireland. Especially because Ashling wasn't a proper journalist: she was simply a good organizer, with an eye for detail.

The magazine arm of Randolph Media was on the third floor of an office building on the quays. Ashling had found out that Randolph Media also owned the small but growing television station Channel 9 and a highly commercial radio station, but these apparently operated out of different premises. Ashling came out of the lift and scooted down the corridor toward reception. The place seemed to hum with activity, people rushing up and down, carrying bits of paper. Ashling thrilled with excitement that peaked into nausea. Just before the reception desk, a tall, messy-haired man was deep in conversation with a tiny Asian girl. They were speaking to each other in low tones and something in the nature of their exchange made Ashling understand that they wished they could shout. Ashling hurried on; she didn't like rows. Not even other people's. She realized how badly she'd misjudged the makeup situation when she got a gander at the receptionist. Trix—that's what her name badge said she was called—had the glittery, luscious-sticky look of a devotee of the More Is More school of slapplication. Her eyebrows were plucked almost into nonexistence, her lip liner was so thick and dark she looked as if she had a mustache, and her entire head of blond hair was caught up in dozens of tiny, evenly spaced, sparkly butterfly clips. She must've had to get up three hours early to do it, Ashling thought, highly impressed. "Hello," Trix growled in a voice that sounded as though she smoked forty cigarettes a day—which, coincidentally, she did. "I've an interview at nine-thi—" Ashling halted at the sound of a loud yelp behind her. She looked over her shoulder and saw the messy-haired man nursing his first finger. "You bit me!" he exclaimed. "Mai, you've drawn blood!"

"Hope your tetanus is up-to-date." The Asian girl laughed scornfully. Trix clicked her tongue, flung her eyes heavenward, and muttered, "Pair of gobshites, they never stop. "Take a seat," she told Ashling. "I'll tell Calvin you're here." She disappeared through the double doors and Ashling wobbled down onto a couch, beside a coffee table that was strewn with all the current titles. The sight of them sent her nerves into sudden overdrive—she so badly wanted this job. Her heart was pounding and her stomach sloshed bile. Absently she rolled the lucky pebble between her thumb and finger. Through a gauze of trembling anxiety she was semiaware of the bitten man slamming into the gents' and the little Asian girl stomping to the lift, her curtain of long black hair swishing to and fro. "Mr. Carter says go on in." Trix was back and doing a bad job of hiding her surprise. For the past two days she'd been plagued by nervous interviewees who'd been kept waiting by her desk for up to half an hour at a time. During which Trix had had to hold off ringing her friends and fellas and deal with the interviewees' pleading questions about what their chances of getting the job were. And to add insult to injury, she knew for a fact that all Calvin Carter and Jack Devine were doing in the interview room was playing rummy. But Calvin Carter had been deserted by Jack Devine, and he was bored and lonely. Might as well be interviewing someone as doing nothing. "Come!" he commanded, when Ashling knocked timidly on the door. He took one glance at the dark-haired woman in the black trouser suit and immediately decided against her. She just wasn't glamorous enough for Colleen. He didn't know much about girls' hair, but he had a feeling that it was usually more elaborate than this one's. Wasn't it normal to have a kind of interfered look to it? Surely it shouldn't just hang there on her shoulders, being brown? And fresh-faced is all very well when you're a milkmaid, but not when you're an aspiring assistant editor of a sexy women's magazine... "Sit down." He supposed he'd better go through the motions for five minutes. Breathless with the desire to do well, Ashling sat on the lone chair in the middle of the floor and faced the man who sat behind the long table. "Jack Devine, the MD for Ireland, will be here shortly," Calvin explained. "I don't know what's keeping him. First up"—he turned his attention to her CV—"you better tell me how to pronounce that name of yours." "Ash-ling. 'Ash' as in cigarette ash, 'ling' to rhyme with sing." "Ash-ling. Ashling. Okay, I can say that. Alrighty, Ash-ling, for the past eight years you've been working in magazines..." "Magazine, actually." Ashling heard someone giggle nervously and realized helplessly that it was herself. "Just the one." "And why are you leaving Woman's Place?" "I'm looking for a new challenge," Ashling offered nervously. Sally Healy had told her to say that. The door opened and in came the bitten man. "Ah, Jack." Calvin

Carter frowned. "This is Ashling Kennedy. 'Ash' as in cigarette ash, 'ling' to rhyme with sing." "How's it going?" Jack had other things on his mind. He was in a foul mood. He'd been up half the night in negotiations with technicians at the TV station while conducting almost simultaneous negotiations with a U.S. network to persuade them not to sell their award-winning series to their rivals but to Channel 9 instead. And as if his workload hadn't already reached critical mass, he'd been charged with setting up this stupid new magazine. The last thing the world needs is another women's magazine! But, if he was honest, the true source of his grief was Mai. She drove him insane. He hated her. He hated her so much. How had he ever thought he was mad about her? No way was he taking her calls. Never again, that was the last time, the very, very last time... He swung himself behind the table, trying hard to concentrate on the interview—old Calvin got his boxers in such a bunch about them. In a moment or two he knew he'd be expected to ask something that sounded vaguely relevant, but all he could think about was that he might be bleeding to death. Or dying of rabies. How soon did the foaming at the mouth begin? he wondered. Leaning back on the two hind legs of his chair, he held his wounded finger out in front of him, staring at it. He couldn't believe she'd bit him. Again. She'd promised the last time...He pulled the twist of toilet paper tighter and bright red blood rushed through it. "Tell me your strengths and weaknesses," Calvin invited Ashling. "I'd have to be honest and say that my weakest area is editorial work. While I can produce tag lines, headings, and short pieces, I haven't much experience of writing long articles." None, actually, if she was completely up-front. "My strengths are that I am meticulous, organized, and hardworking. I'm a good second-in-command," Ashling said earnestly, quoting directly from Sally Healy. Then she stopped and said, "Excuse me, would you like a Band-Aid for your finger?" Jack Devine looked up, startled. "Who, me?" "I don't see anyone else bleeding all over the place." Ashling attempted a smile. Jack Devine shook his head violently. "Nah, no. "Thanks," he added, surlily. "Why not?" Calvin Carter intervened. "I'm fine." Jack gestured with his good hand. "Take the Band-Aid," Calvin said. "Sounds like a good idea." Ashling lifted her bag onto her lap and with the minimum of rummaging produced a box of bandages. Lifting the lid, she flicked through them, lifted one out, and handed it to Jack. "Try that for size." Jack looked at it as if he had no idea what to do. Calvin Carter was no help either. Ashling swallowed a sigh, got up from her chair, took the Band-Aid from Jack's hand, and ripped off the grease-proof paper. "Hold out your finger." "Yes, ma'am," he said sarcastically. With speed and efficiency she wrapped it around the bleeding digit. To her surprise, on the pretext of making sure the plaster was secure,

she gave his finger a little squeeze and felt shameful satisfaction at the wince that fluttered across his face. "What else have you got?" Calvin Carter asked curiously. "Aspirins?" She nodded cautiously. "Would you like one?" "No, thanks. A pen and notepad?" She nodded again. "How about—and this is a long shot, I'll admit—a portable sewing kit?" Ashling paused sheepishly, then her entire demeanor lifted and lightened in a half laugh of admission. "Actually, I do." Her smile was wide. "You're very organized," Jack Devine interrupted. He made it sound like an insult. "Somebody needs to be." Calvin Carter had revised his earlier opinion of her. She was charming, and even though she had lipstick on her teeth, at least she was wearing lipstick. "Thank you, Ms. Kennedy, we'll be in touch." Ashling shook hands with both men, once more taking the opportunity to give Jack Devine's wound a good, hard squeeze. "Hey, I liked her." Calvin Carter laughed. "I didn't," Jack Devine said, moodily. "I said I liked her," Calvin Carter repeated. He wasn't used to being disagreed with. "She's reliable and resourceful. Give her the job." 4 Clodagh woke early. Nothing new there. Clodagh always woke early. That's what having children did to you. If they weren't roaring to be fed, they were squashing into the bed between you and your husband, and if they weren't doing that, they were in the kitchen at six-thirty on a Saturday morning, clattering saucepans ominously. This morning they were on Clattering Saucepans Ominously duty. She would subsequently discover that Craig, the five-year-old, was showing Molly, the two-and-a-half-year-old, how to make scrambled eggs. Out of flour, water, olive oil, ketchup, brown sauce, vinegar, cocoa, birthday candles, and, of course, eggs. Nine of them, including shells. Clodagh knew from the quality of the racket that terrible things were taking place in the room below her, but she was too tired, or too something, to get up and intervene. Eyes focused on nothing, she lay listening to chairs being scraped along the new limestone-tiled floor, month-old SieMatic cupboards being opened and slammed, and Le Creuset pans being battered to within an inch of their lives. Beside her, still deep in sleep, Dylan shifted, then threw his arm over her. She snuggled into him for a moment, looking for relief. Then froze in familiar reluctance and wearily moved away again as she felt his arousal unfurling and straightening against her stomach. Not sex. She couldn't bear it. She wanted affection, but whenever she moved her body against his, seeking out comfort, he got turned on. Especially in the morning. She felt guilty every time she turned away from him. But not guilty enough to oblige. He stood a better chance in the evenings, especially when she'd had a few drinks. She never deprived him for longer than a month because she was too afraid of what it would mean. So when the deadline loomed, she always orchestrated some form of

drunkenness and delivered the goods, her enthusiasm and inventiveness in direct proportion to how much gin she'd consumed. Dylan reached for her again and she slithered across the sheets out of reach, with a nimbleness born of many months of practice. A particularly hysterical bout of clattering wafted up from the room below. "Little fuckers," Dylan mumbled, sleepily. "They'll knock the house down on us." "I'll go and shout at them." It was safer to get up. By the time Ashling arrived later that morning, the scrambled egg debacle was but a distant memory and had been superseded by the atrocities of the breakfast table. When Clodagh went to answer the door, she was involved in some kind of complicated negotiations with the angelic, flaxen-haired Molly, concerning the wearing of a cardigan. Molly was insisting on wearing her orange one. "Hi, Ashling," Clodagh said absently, then thrust her face down to Molly's and insisted in exasperation, "But you're too big for it, Molly. You haven't worn it since you were a baby. Why don't you wear this lovely pink one?" "Noooooooo!" Molly tried to wriggle away to freedom. "But you'll be cold." Clodagh held tight on to Molly's arm. "Noooooooo!" "Come into the kitchen, Ashling." Clodagh dragged Molly down the hall. "CRAIG! GET OFF THE CAROUSEL!" The equally angelic, flaxen-haired Craig had clambered into the corner cupboard in the kitchen and was swinging himself backward and forward on the wire shelf, cushioned on bags of rice and pasta. Ashling walked to the kettle and switched it on. Ashling and Clodagh had grown up two doors away from each other and had been best friends since the time when it was safer for Ashling to be in Clodagh's house than in her own. It had been Clodagh who'd broken the news to Ashling about her waistless condition. It was also Clodagh who'd enlightened Ashling on other aspects of herself by saying, "You're so fortunate to have your personality. Me, all I have is my looks." Not that Ashling had ever taken umbrage. Clodagh wasn't malicious, simply candid, and it would have been a total waste of time to deny how singularly beautiful she was. Short and shapely, with Scandinavian coloring and long, burnished ropes of blond hair, she was traffic-stopping. Ashling had momentous news. "I got a job!" "When?" "I heard over a week ago," Ashling admitted. "But I've been at work every night until midnight tidying it all up for the new person at Woman's Place." "I thought it was funny you hadn't been in touch. So tell me all about it." But each time Ashling tried, Craig insisted on reading to her, from an upside-down book. When the spotlight moved away from him even for a second, he clawed it back. "Go and play outside on the swing," Clodagh cajoled him. "But it's raining." "You're Irish, get used to it. Go on. Out!" No sooner had Craig gone than Molly was center stage. "Want!" she declared, pointing at Ashling's coffee. "No, that's

Ashling's," Clodagh said. "You can't have it." "She can if she wants . . ." Ashling felt she'd better say. "WANT!" Molly insisted. "Would you mind?" Clodagh asked. "I'll get you another." Ashling slid the mug along the table, but Clodagh intercepted it before it reached Molly, which started a great caterwauling. "I'm just blowing on it," Clodagh explained. "So you won't burn your mouth." "WANT! WANT! WANT!" "But it's too hot! You'll burn yourself." "WANT IT. WANT IT NOW!" "Oh, all right, then. Slowly now, don't spill it." Molly put her mouth to the lip of the mug, then pulled back and started screeching. "Hot! Sore! Waaaaaaah!" "Oh, for fuck's sake," Clodagh muttered. "Fuck's sake," Molly enunciated, with crystal clarity. "That's right," Clodagh said, with a savagery that shocked Ashling. "For fuck's sake." Dylan rushed into the room, in response to Molly's roaring. "Ashling!" He smiled, using his big hand to shove his corn-blond hair back off his face. "You're looking great. Any news on the job front?" "I've got one!" "Lassoing runaway stallions in Mullingar?" "In a magazine. A young women's one." "Fair play! More money?" Ashling nodded proudly. Not a huge increase, but better than the barely index-linked pittance she'd been getting for the past eight years at Woman's Place. "And no more Letters from Father Bennett. Just as well—did you see The Catholic Judger's gone bust? There was a thing in the paper about it." "So it's all worked out for the best really." Ashling glowed. "Mrs. O'Sullivan from Waterford is probably the best thing that ever happened to me!" Dylan looked amused, then alarmed, as a huge commotion erupted in the garden. Craig had fallen off the swing, and judging from his screeching and bawling, was in considerable pain. Ashling was already rummaging in her bag for the rescue remedy. For herself. "Will you go?" Clodagh turned weary eyes to Dylan. "I have them all week. And just tell me his injuries on a need-to-know basis." Dylan withdrew. "Do you want me to check on Craig . . . ?" Ashling asked anxiously. "I have Band-Aids." "So do I." Clodagh gave her an exasperated look. "Tell me about your job. Please." "Okay." Ashling gave one last regretful look at the garden. "It's a glossy magazine. Much more glamorous than Woman's Place." When she got to the part about Jack Devine arguing furiously, then being bitten by the Asian girl, Clodagh finally perked up. "Go on," she urged, her eyes sparkling. "Tell us! Nothing, but nothing, puts me in better humor than overhearing people having a right old ding-dong. One day last week, I was coming out of the gym and there was a man and a woman in a parked car and they were roaring at each other. I mean, roaring! Even with the windows up I could hear them. Put me in great form for the rest of the day." "I hate that," Ashling admitted. "It's so upsetting." "But why? Oh, I suppose with your, um, background... But for most people it's nice. They feel they're not the only ones having a hard



time.” “Who’s having a hard time?” Anxiety bruised Ash-ling’s face. Clodagh looked uncomfortable. “No one. But I really envy you!” She suddenly exploded. “Single, starting a new job, all that excitement.” Ashling was speechless. To her, Clodagh’s life was the Holy Grail. The good-looking, devoted husband with the thriving business, the tasteful, Edwardian redbrick house in the chichi village of Donnybrook. Nothing to do all day long except microwave Barney pasta, make plans to redecorate already perfect rooms, and wait for Dylan to come home. “And I bet you were out clubbing last night,” Clodagh almost accused. “Yes, but... Only the Sugarclub and I was home by two. Alone,” she said with heavy emphasis. “Clodagh, you’ve everything. Two gorgeous children, a gorgeous husband...” Is he gorgeous? Surprised, Clodagh realized that this wasn’t something that had occurred to her lately. Doubtfully she admitted that for a man in his midthirties Dyl-an’s body wasn’t bad—his midriff hadn’t melted into a soft cone-shaped fold of pint-drinking flab like so many of his contemporaries’ had. He still took an interest in clothes—more than she did these days, if she was honest. And he went to a proper hairdresser’s, and not the local ol’ fella barber, who sent everyone out looking like their dads. Ashling continued to protest. “...and you look fantastic! Two children and you’ve a better figure than me— and I’ve had no children, nor am I ever likely to, if my luck with men doesn’t turn soon. Ha ha ha.” Ashling was keen for Clodagh to smile, but all she said was, “Everything feels old. Especially with Dylan.” Ashling desperately summoned some advice. “You just need to recapture the magic. Try and remember what it was like when you first met.” Where was she getting this stuff from? Oh yeah, she’d written it herself in Woman’s Place, to a woman who was going mad because her husband had retired and was forever under her feet. “I can’t even remember where I met him,” Clodagh admitted. “Oh no, of course I do. You brought him to Lochlan Hegarty’s twenty-first, remember? God, it seems like a lifetime ago.” “You have to work at keeping things fresh,” Ashling quoted. “Go out for romantic meals, maybe even go away for the weekend. I’ll baby-sit anytime you like.” She experienced a surge of alarm at this rash promise. “I wanted to get married.” Clodagh seemed to be talking to herself. “Dylan and I seemed right for each other.” “That’s putting it mildly.” Ashling remembered the frisson that had passed through the room when Clodagh and Dylan first clapped eyes on each other. Dylan was the most good-looking man in the group that he hung around with, Clodagh was undeniably the best-looking girl in her gang, and people always gravitate toward their equals. Though Dylan had arrived at the party courtesy of Ash-ling, Ashling was instantly forgotten as soon as he saw Clodagh. Ashling couldn’t hold it against them. They were meant to be together, she

might as well be a good sport about it. Clodagh gave a tired chuckle. "Everything is fine, really. Or at least it will be when I've changed the color scheme in the front room." "More decorating!" It seemed no time since Clodagh had gotten her new kitchen in. In fact, it didn't seem much longer than that since she'd done her front room. In the afternoon, on the way home from Clodagh's, Ash-ling ducked into Dunne's to buy food. She flung packet after packet of microwavable popcorn into the basket, then went to pay. The woman ahead of her in the line had such a lacquered, stylish look about her that Ashling found herself leaning back, all the better to admire her. Like Ashling, she wore sweatpants, trainers, and a little cardigan, but unlike Ashling, everything looked touchable and lustrous. The way things are before they're washed for the first time and lose their sheen of perfect newness. Her trainers were pink Nike ones that Ashling had seen in a magazine, but that you couldn't get in Ireland yet. Her pink, parachute silk rucksack matched the pink gel in the heel of the trainers. And her hair was lovely—shiny and swingy, thick and glossy—in the way that you could never achieve yourself. In fascination, Ashling checked out the contents of the woman's basket. Seven cans of strawberry Slim-Fast, seven baking potatoes, seven apples, and four ...five... six... seven individually wrapped little squares of chocolate from the pick'n'mix. She hadn't even put the chocolate into a bag, she looked as if she was treating them as seven individual purchases. Some irresistible instinct told Ashling that this paltry basketful constituted the woman's weekly shop. Either that or she was providing a safe house for Grumpy, Sneezy, Dopey, Happy, and whatever the other three were called.

5 It was pouring rain when Lisa's plane landed at Dublin airport early on Saturday afternoon. When she'd taken off from London, she'd foolishly assumed that she couldn't possibly feel worse, but one look at the rain-soaked view of Dublin made her see the error of her ways. Dermot, her taxi driver to the city center, only added to her grief. He was chatty and amiable and Lisa didn't want chatty and amiable. She thought with longing of the psychotic, Uzi-carrying madman who might have been driving her taxi, if only she was in New York. "Have you family here?" Dermot asked. "No." "A boyfriend, so?" "No." When she wouldn't talk about herself, he talked instead. "I love driving," he confided. "Whoop-de-doo," Lisa said nastily. "Do you know what I do on my day off?" Lisa ignored him. "I go for a drive! That's what I do. And not just down to Wicklow, either, but a long one. Up to Belfast, over to Galway, or across to Limerick. One day I made it as far as Letterkenny, that's in Donegal, you know...I love my job." On and on he went as they inched through the wet, greasy streets. When they got

to the hotel on Harcourt Street, he helped her with her several bags and wished her a pleasant stay in Ireland. Malone's Aparthotel was a strange new breed of hostelry—it had no bar, or restaurant, or room service, or anything really, except for thirty rooms, each with small kitchen areas attached. Lisa was booked in for a fortnight and hopefully by then she'd have found somewhere to live. In a daze, she hung up a couple of things, looked out at the gray view of the busy road, then flung herself out onto the damp streets to inspect the city that now constituted home. Now that she was actually here, the shock hit her with unprecedented force. How had her life gone so horribly wrong? She should be strolling along Fifth Avenue right now, and not in this drenched village. The guidebook said that it would only take half a day to walk around Dublin and see all its important sights—as if that was a good thing! Sure enough, less than two hours was enough to check out the high spots—read shopping—both north and south of the river Liffey. It was worse than she'd expected: nobody stocked La Prairie products, Stephane Kelian shoes, Vivienne Westwood, or Ozwald Boateng. It's total pants! A one-horse town, she thought, in mild hysteria. And the horse is wearing last season's Hilfiger. She wanted to go home. She longed for London so badly, then through the mist she saw something that made her heart lift—a Marks & Spencer! Normally she never went near them—the clothes were too dowdy, the food too tempting—but today she flung herself through the entrance, like a pursued dissident seeking asylum in a foreign embassy. She resisted the urge to lie, panting, against the inside of the door. But only because the door was automatic. Then she immersed herself in the food department because it had no windows and didn't interfere with her fantasies. I'm in the High Street Kensington branch, she pretended to herself. In a moment I'm going to leave and drop into Urban Outfitters. She idled in front of the fresh fruit. No, I've changed my mind, she decided. I'm in the Marble Arch branch. As soon as I've finished here, I'm going to South Molton Street. It gave her a peculiar comfort to know that the melon salads in front of her were part of the diaspora of melon salads in all the London branches. She pressed slightly on the taut cellophane lid and felt a sense of belonging—faint but real. When she was restored to calmness she went to an ordinary supermarket and bought her weekly shopping. A routine would keep her sane—well, it had certainly helped in the past. Home she traipsed, the hood of her cardigan up to protect her hair from the rain that had started to fall again. She unpacked the seven cans of Slim-Fast and placed them neatly in the cupboard, the potatoes and apples went in the little fridge, and the seven pieces of chocolate went into a drawer. Now what? Saturday night. All alone in a strange city. Nothing to do but to stay in and watch...It was then that she noticed that there was

no telly in the room. It was such a big blow she cried a flash flood of hot, spurty tears. What was she going to do now? She'd already read this month's Elle, Red, New Woman, Company, Cosmo, Marie Claire, Vogue, Tatler, and the Irish magazines that she'd be competing against. She could read a book, she supposed. If she had one. Or a newspaper, except newspapers were so boring and depressing... At least she had clothes to hang up. So while the streets below filled with young people en route to a night on the piss, Lisa smoked and shook dresses and skirts and jackets onto hangers, smoothed cardigans and tops into drawers, arranged boots and shoes into a perfect military parade, hung handbags... The phone rang, startling her from her soothing rhythm. "Hello?" And then she was sorry she'd answered. "Oliver!" Oh, bugger. "Where did you... how did you get this number?" "Your mum." Interfering old cow. "When were you going to tell me, Lisa?" Never, actually. "Soon. When I'd got my own place." "What have you done with our flat?" "Got tenants in. Don't worry, you'll get your share of the rent." "And why Dublin? I thought you wanted to go to New York." "This seemed like a smarter career move." "Jesus, you're hard. Well, I hope you're happy," he said, in a manner that meant he hoped the very opposite. "I hope it's all been worth it." Then he hung up. She looked down on the Dublin street and started to shake. Had it been worth it? Well, she'd just better make damn sure it would be. She'd make Colleen the biggest success in magazine publishing. She inhaled deeply on her cigarette, then went to light it again because she thought it had gone out. It hadn't, but it wasn't calming the pain. She needed something. The chocolate called to her from the drawer, but she resisted it. Just because she felt she was in hell was no excuse to go over fifteen hundred calories a day. In the end she gave in. She coiled in an armchair, slowly removed the paper, and ran her teeth along the side of the chocolate, shaving away tiny curl after tiny curl, until it was all gone. It took an hour. 6 There was a clink of bottles at Ashling's door, announcing Joy's arrival. "Ted's on his way, leave the door on the latch." Joy clattered a bottle of white wine onto Ashling's tiny kitchen counter. Ashling braced herself. She was not disappointed. "Phil Collins," Joy said, with an evil glint in her eye. "Michael Bolton or Michael Jackson, and you must sleep with one of them." Ashling winced. "Well, definitely not Phil Collins, and definitely not Michael Jackson, and definitely not Michael Bolton." "You must choose one." Joy busied herself with the corkscrew. "Christ." Ashling's face was a twist of revulsion. "Phil Collins, I suppose, I haven't picked him in a while. Right, your turn. Benny Hill, Tom Jones, or... let me see, who's truly revolting? David Copperfield." "Full sex or just—" "Full sex," Ashling said, firmly. "Tom Jones, then." Joy sighed, handing Ashling a glass of wine. "Now, show me what

you're wearing." It was Saturday evening and Ted was doing the "tryout" slot at a comedy gig. It was his first time doing his act for anyone other than friends and family, and Ashling and Joy were going along to hold his hand, then crash the party afterward. Joy—whose surname was, memorably, Ryder—lived in the flat below Ashling's. She was short, rounded, curly-haired, and dangerous—on account of her prodigious appetite for drink, drugs, and men, coupled with her mission to turn Ashling into her partner in crime. "Come into my bedroom," Ashling invited, and they both edged in. "I'm going to wear these cream cargo pants and this little top." Ashling turned from the wardrobe too quickly and stood on Joy's foot, then Joy leaped up and banged her elbow on the portable telly. "Ouch! Doesn't the crampedness of these shoe boxes ever get to you?" Joy sighed, rubbing her elbow. Ashling shook her head. "I love living in town and you can't have everything." Quickly, Ashling changed into her going-out clothes. "I'd look like a Teletubby in that getup." Joy admired her, wistfully. "It's a terrible thing to be pear-shaped!" "But at least you have a waist. Now, I thought I'd do something with my hair..." Ashling had bought several colored butterfly clips after she'd seen what a lovely job Trix had done with them. But when she stuck them into the front of her own hair, sweeping two strands off her face, the effect wasn't quite the same. "I just look ridiculous!" "You do," Joy agreed, kindly. "Now, do you think Mick, Half-Man-Half-Badger, will be at the party after the gig?" "Could be. It was at a party with Ted that you met him before, wasn't it? He's friends with some of the comedians, isn't he?" "Mmmmm," Joy nodded dreamily. "But that was weeks ago and I haven't seen him since. Where did he disappear to, that international half-man-half-badger of mystery? Get the tarot cards and we'll have a quick look at what's going to happen." They traipsed into the bijou sitting room, Joy plucked a card from the deck, then turned it to Ashling. "Ten of Swords. That's a shite one, isn't it?" "Shite," Ashling agreed. Joy grasped the bundle of cards and at high speed flicked through them until she found one she liked. "The Queen of Wands, now that's more like it! Now you pick one." "Three of Cups." Ashling held it up. "Beginnings." "That means you're going to meet a fella, too." Ashling laughed. "It's ages since Phelim went to Australia, no?" Joy interrogated. "It's about time you got over him." "I am over him. I was the one who ended it, remember?" "Only because he wouldn't do the decent thing. Although good for you. Even when they won't do the decent thing by me, I still can't give them their marching orders. You're very strong." "It's not strength. It was because I couldn't stand the tension of waiting for him to make up his mind. I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown." Phelim had been Ashling's on-off boyfriend for five years. They'd had good times and

not-so-good times because Phelim always lost his nerve at the last minute when it came to full-blown, grown-up commitment. “How long have you not been going out with Ashling, now?” his pals used to tease him. To make the relationship work, Ashling spent her life avoiding cracks in the pavement, saluting lone magpies, picking up pennies, and consulting both hers and Phe-lim’s horoscope. Her pockets were always weighed down with lucky pebbles, rose quartz and miraculous medals, and she’d rubbed nearly all the gold paint off her lucky Buddha. Each time they got back together the well of hope was further depleted, and eventually Ashling’s love just burned out from all his dithering. Like every breakup, the final one had been unacrimonious. Ashling said calmly, “You’re always talking about how you hate being trapped in Dublin and how you want to travel the world, so go on. Do it.” Even now a faint line of connection hummed between them, across twelve thousand miles. He’d come home in February for his brother’s wedding and the first person he’d gone to see was Ashling. They’d walked into each other’s arms and stood, squeezing each other for minutes on end, tears in their eyes from the close-but-no-cigar air of it all. “Bastard,” Joy said, energetically. “He wasn’t,” Ashling insisted. “He couldn’t give me what I wanted, but that doesn’t mean I hate him.” “I hate all my ex-boyfriends,” Joy boasted. “I can’t wait for Half-Man-Half-Badger to be one, then he won’t have this hold on me. Now, what if he’s there tonight? I need to seem unavailable. If only... no, an engagement ring would be going too far. A love bite might do the trick, though.” “Where are you going to get one of those?” “From you! Here.” Joy swept aside a mass of curls from her neck. “Would you mind?” “Yes.” “Please.” And because she was an obliging type, Ashling pushed away her reluctance, halfheartedly put her teeth on Joy’s neck, and gave her a hickey. Mid-hickey-giving, someone said, “Oh.” They looked up, frozen in a pose that was somehow sodden with guilt. Ted was standing, looking at them. He seemed upset. “The door was open...I didn’t realize . . .” Then he gathered himself. “I hope you’ll both be very happy.” Ashling and Joy looked at each other and roared laughing, until Ashling took pity on him and explained all. He saw the tarot cards on the table and pounced. “Eight of Wands, Ashling, what does that mean?” “Success in business,” Ashling said. “Your act will go down a storm tonight.” “Yeah, but will I be a big hit with the goils?” Ted had become a stand-up comedian for one reason and one reason only—to get a girlfriend. He’d seen the way women flung themselves at the comedians working the Dublin circuit, and thought that his chances of scoring were higher than at a dating agency. Not that he’d go to a real dating agency. The only one he’d have anything to do with was the Ashling Kennedy dating agency— Ashling regularly sought to matchmake all her single

friends. But the only one of Ashling's pals Ted had liked was Clodagh and unfortunately she was unavailable. Very. "Take another card," Ashling invited him. The one he picked was the Hanged Man. "You'll definitely get lucky tonight," Ashling promised. "But it's the Hanged Man!" "Doesn't matter." Ashling knew that if you put a man on a stage, no matter how plug-ugly he is—and be it strumming a guitar, lepping around in doublets and purple hose, or observing that you can wait for a bus for ages, then three come at once—you can guarantee that women will find him attractive. Even when it's only standing on a dusty, foot-high platform in a twenty-foot-square room, he assumes a strange, seductive glamour. "I've decided to change my act, go slightly surreal. Talk about owls." "Owls?" "Owls have worked for lots of people." Ted was defensive. Oh Christ. Ashling's heart sank. "Come on, let's go." As they left the flat there was a little pileup in the hall as everyone sought to rub the lucky Buddha. The comedy gig was in a packed, rowdy club. Ted wasn't on until the middle of the show, and though the proper comedians were clever and slick, Ashling couldn't let go and enjoy herself. Too worried about how Ted would go down. Like a lead balloon, if the performance of the other first-timer was anything to go by. He was an odd, hairy little boy whose act consisted almost entirely of "doing" Beavis and Butt-Head. The audience was unforgiving. As they booed and shouted, "Get off, you're crap," Ashling's heart twisted for Ted. Then it was Ted's turn. Ashling and Joy clasped hands, like proud but justifiably anxious parents. Within seconds, their hands were so slippery with sweat that they had to let go. Under the lone spotlight, Ted looked frail and vulnerable. Absently, he rubbed his stomach, lifting up his T-shirt, giving a brief glimpse of the waistband of his Calvins and his narrow, dark-haired midriff. Ashling approved. That might get the girls interested. "This owl walks into a bar," Ted started. The audience's upturned faces were lambent with expectation. "He orders a pint of milk, a packet of crisps, and ten smokes. And the barman turns to his friend and says, 'Look at that, a talking owl.' " There were one or two nonplussed titters, but otherwise an expectant silence reigned. They were still waiting for the punch line. Anxiously Ted started into a new gag. "My owl has got no nose," he announced. More silence. Ashling had almost gouged a stigmata in her palm with tension. "My owl has got no nose," Ted repeated, laced with desperation. Then Ashling understood. "How does he smell?" she called, her voice quavering. "Terrible!" The air was thick with perplexedness. People turned to their neighbors, their faces twisted into what-the-fuck ...? And on Ted labored. "I met a friend of mine and he said, 'Who was that lady I saw you walking along Grafton Street with?' And I said, 'That was no lady, that was my owl!' " And suddenly they seemed to get it. The laughter started small,

but began to swell and burgeon, until the audience were in paroxysms. In fairness, it was Saturday night and they were pissed. Behind her, Ashling heard people wheeze, "Your man's hilarious. Off-the-wall, completely." "What's yellow and wise?" Ted dazzled with a smile. The audience were in the palm of his hand, their breath held, waiting for the gag. Ted smiled around the room. "Owl infested custard!" The roof nearly lifted. "What's gray and has a trunk?" A giddy pause. "An owl going on holidays. That's a gray owl, obviously." There went the rafters again. "You're recruiting for a job." Ted was on a roll and the audience was in floods of merriment. "You interview three owls and ask each of them what's the capital of Rome. The first one says she doesn't know, the second ones says it's Italy, and the third one says that Rome is a capital. Which owl do you give the job to?" "The owl with the biggest tits!" someone yelled from the back, and once again laughter and applause rose and flapped like a flock of birds. The more established comedians who'd only let Ted on as a favor to stop him pestering them looked at one another anxiously. "Get him off," Bicycle Billy muttered. "The little bollocks." "Gotta go," Ted ruefully told the audience as Mark Dignan made an urgent throat-cutting gesture. "AAAAAWWWWWWW," everyone complained in bitter disappointment. "We've created a fucking monster!" Bicycle Billy whispered to Archie Archer (real name Brian O'Toole). "I've been Ted Mullins, a comedian who tells a load of owl jokes. Or should I say owl jokes?" Ted twinkled. "And you've been an owl audience!" Amid hysterical cheers, whistles, foot stomping, and thunderous applause, he took his leave. Later, as everyone beat their way out, Ashling overheard person after person talking about Ted. "What's yellow and wise? I thought I'd end myself laughing." "That Ted fella was fantastic. Sexy, too." "I liked the way he lifted his—" "T-shirt. Yeah, so did I." "D'you think he has a girlfriend?" "Bound to." The party was in a modern building along the quays. As it was Mark Dignan's flat, and loads of the other guests were also comedians, Ashling had expected to be kept in hysterics all night. But, though the room was crowded and noisy, a bizarre atmosphere of gloom pervaded. "They're all keeping mum in case anyone steals their lines or ideas," explained Joy, a veteran of such occasions. "Without a paying audience you wouldn't get these fellas being funny to save their lives. Now, where is he?" Joy went on a Half-Man-Half-Badger walkabout and Ashling poured herself a glass of wine in the galley kitchen, where Bicycle Billy was rolling a spliff. As he was short and troll-like, she was able to smile at him and say, "You were very funny tonight. You must get great satisfaction from what you do." "Ah, not really," he said grumpily. "I'm writing a novel, you see. That's what I really want to do with my life." "Lovely," Ashling encouraged. "Oh no, it's not." Billy



was keen to emphasize. "It's very truthful, very depressing. Very grim. Ah, where's my lighter?" "Allow me." Ashling flared a match and lit his spliff. Seemed to her like he needed it. Through the crowds in the sitting room, she saw Ted enthroned on an armchair, an orderly line of interested girls shuffling forward to make their case. Staring out the window into the oil-black waters of the Liffey was a broody figure, a thick stripe of gray through the front of his long, black hair. Aha, thought Ashling. Mick, international half-man-half-badger of mystery, I presume. Joy was nearby, energetically ignoring him. Under the half-man-half-badger circumstances Ash-ling decided to let her alone. Hanging around, swigging her wine, she spotted Mark Dignan. As he was almost seven feet tall and had the poppiest eyes she'd ever seen on someone who hadn't recently been strangled, she was able to have a little chat with him, too. But he dismissed her praise of his act with a cranky wave of his hand. "It'll do until my novel is published." "Ah, you're writing a novel, too. So, um...what's it about?" "It's about a man who sees the world in all its rottenness." Mark's eyes bulged even farther. They'd fall out onto the carpet soon if he wasn't careful, Ashling thought anxiously. "It's very depressing," Mark boasted. "Like, unbelievably depressing. He hates life more than life itself." Mark realized he'd said something vaguely witty and flicked an anxious glance to make sure no one had heard. "Er, the best of luck." Miserable bastard. Ashling moved away, and was buttonholed by an enthusiastic, bright-eyed man who insisted that Ted was a comedic anarchist, an ironic postmodern deconstructionist of the entire genre. "He's taken the basic gag and completely subverted it. Challenging our expectations of what's funny. Anyway, d'you want to dance?" "What? Here?" Ashling was completely thrown. It was a long time since a strange man had asked her to dance. Especially in someone's sitting room. Although now that she looked, people—all female, of course—were kind of flinging themselves around to Fat Boy Slim. "Ah, no thanks," she apologized. "It's too early in the night, I'm still too inhibited." "Okay, I'll ask you again in an hour." "Great!" she exclaimed, hollowly, taking in his eager face. An hour wouldn't get her drunk enough. A lifetime wouldn't suffice. Sometime later, to her delight, she spotted Joy kissing the face off half-man-half-badger. She hung around a little longer. Though it was a fairly crappy party, she was surprised to find she was happy to be with a crowd and happy to be on its edges. Such contentment was rare: all Ashling knew was that she almost never felt whole. Even at her most fulfilled, something remained forever absent, right at her very core. Like the tiny, pinprick dot that remained in the wash of black when the telly used to shut down for the night. But tonight she was calm and peaceful, alone but not lonely. Even though the only men who'd hit on her weren't her

type, she didn't feel like a failure when she decided to go home. At the door she met Mr. Enthusiastic again. "Going already?" "Hold it a minute." He scribbled something on a piece of paper, then handed it to her. She waited until she was outside before opening the twist of paper. It was a name—Marcus Valentine—a phone number, and the instruction "Bellez-moi!" It was the best laugh she'd had all night. The walk home took ten minutes—at least the rain had stopped. When she reached the front door of her block of flats, there was a man asleep in the doorway. The same man who'd been there the other day. Except he was younger than she'd realized. Pale and slight, clutching onto his thick grubby orange blanket, he looked barely more than a child. Rummaging in her rucksack, she found a pound and placed it silently beside his head. But maybe it'd be nicked, she worried, so she moved it under his blanket. Then, stepping over him, she let herself in. As the door clicked behind her, she heard, "Thanks," so faint and whispered she wasn't sure if she'd imagined it. 7 Ashling woke at twelve on Sunday, feeling rested and only mildly hungover. She lay on the couch and smoked cigarettes until The Dukes of Hazzard finished. Then she went out and bought bread, orange juice, cigarettes, and newspapers—one scurrilous tabloid and one broadsheet to cancel out the rag. After gorging herself to the point of mild disgust on overblown stories of infidelity, she decided to tidy her flat. This mostly consisted of carrying about twenty crumb-strewn plates and half-empty glasses of water from the bedroom to the kitchen sink, picking up an empty tub of Häagen-Dazs from where it had rolled under the couch, and opening the windows. She drew the line at polishing, but she sprayed Pledge around the room, and the smell instantly made her feel virtuous. Cautiously she sniffed her bed linen. Grand, it'd do for another week. Then, even though she knew it couldn't have gone anywhere, she checked that the suit she'd had dry-cleaned hadn't been stolen. It was still hanging in her wardrobe, beside a clean top. Big day tomorrow. Very big day tomorrow. It wasn't every Monday she started a new job. In fact, it had been over eight years and she was horribly nervous. But excited, too, she insisted, trying to ignore her fluttery stomach. What now? Vacuuming, she decided, because if you did it right it was great exercise for the waist. Out came her magenta-and-lime-green Dyson. Even now she couldn't believe she'd spent so much money on a household appliance. Money that she could just as easily have spent on handbags or bottles of wine. The only conclusion she could draw was that she was finally a grown-up. Which was funny because in her head she was still sixteen and trying to decide what to do when she left school. She flicked the switch and, energetically bending and twisting from the waist, worked her way across the floor. Much to the relief of her very hungover neighbor in the flat below

(Joy), it didn't take long—Ashling's flat was ludicrously small. But how she loved it. The biggest fear about losing her job was that she wouldn't be able to meet her mortgage payments. She'd bought the flat three years previously, when she'd finally understood that Phelim and she wouldn't be applying together to purchase a cottage with roses 'round the door. There had been an element of brinkmanship to it—naturally she'd hoped that Phelim would hurtle in as the credits were rolling and breathlessly agree to sign up for the regulatory three bedroom semi in a distant suburb. But to her heavyhearted disappointment he didn't and the purchase went ahead. At the time it had seemed like an admission of failure. But not now. This flat was her haven, her nest, and her first real home. She'd lived in rented hovels since she was seventeen, sleeping in other people's beds, sitting on lumpy sofas that landlords had bought for cheapness, not comfort. She hadn't had a stick of furniture when she'd moved in. Apart from the essentials like an iron and a pile of threadbare towels, mismatched sheets and pillowcases, everything had to be bought from scratch. Which caused Ashling to throw a rare tantrum. She fumed with seething resentment at the thought of diverting month after month of clothes money to buy all sorts of stupid things. Like chairs. "But we can't sit on the floor," Phelim had yelled. "I know," Ashling admitted. "I just didn't realize it would be like this..." "But you're mind-blowingly organized." He was baffled. "I thought you'd be great at this sort of thing. Whatjaccallit? Homemaking." She looked so lost and bleak that Phelim said softly, "Oh baby, let me help. I'll buy you some furniture." "A bed, I bet," Ashling said scornfully. "Well, now that you mention it . . ." Phelim was fond of having sex with Ashling. Buying a bed for her was no hardship. "Can I afford it?" Ashling considered. Now that she'd reorganized Phelim's finances, he was a lot better off. "I suppose," she said sulkily. "If you do it on your credit card." Bitterly, irritably, she applied for a bank loan, then bought herself a couch, a table, a wardrobe, and a couple of chairs. And that, she resolved, would be that. For over a year she refused to buy blinds. "I'll just not wash the windows," she said. "That way no one can see in." And she only got herself a shower curtain when the daily puddles on her bathroom floor began to leak through to Joy's. But somewhere along the line her priorities had changed. Though she wasn't anything like the ninja decorator that Clodagh was, she certainly cared. To the point where she owned not just one but a grand total of two sets of bed linen (a funky denim-look set and a crisp white Zen ensemble with a waffle throw). Recently she'd shelled out forty quid on a mirror that she didn't even need, just because she thought it was pretty. Granted she'd been premenstrual and not in her right mind, but still. And the sea change was obviously complete the day she'd handed

over three hundred quid for a dust-sucker. There was a knock at the door. Joy, white as a ghost, sidled in. "Sorry, I got a bit carried away with the cleaning," Ashling realized. "Did I wake you?" "It's okay. I've to go out to Howth to see my mammy." Joy made an anguished face. "I can't cancel again, I've done it for the past four Sundays. But how will I cope? She'll have made a huge roast dinner which she'll try to force-feed me and she'll spend all afternoon quizzing me, trying to establish if I'm happy. You know what mothers are like." Well, yes and no, Ashling thought. She was familiar with the "Are you happy?" questions. Only thing was, it was Ashling who used to monitor her mother's happiness levels, not the other way around. "If only she'd have Sunday lunch at a more civilized time," Joy complained. "Like Tuesday evening." Ashling grinned. "Now, I suppose you haven't seen Ted so far today?" "Not yet. I presume he got lucky last night and is refusing to leave the poor girl's bedroom." "He really was surprisingly excellent last night. So, are you going to tell me what happened with Half-Man-Half-Badger or do I have to beat it out of you?" Joy instantly lightened. "He spent the night with me. We didn't actually have sex, but I gave him a BJ and he said he'll call. I wonder if he will." "One swallow doesn't make a relationship," Ashling warned, with the wisdom of experience. "Who are you telling? Give me them"—Joy leaned over to the pack of tarot cards—"till I see what they say. The Empress? What does that mean?" "Fertility. Keep taking your pill." "Cripes. How did you get on last night? Meet anyone nice?" "No." "You'll just have to try harder. You're thirty-one, all the good men will be gone soon." I don't need a mother, Ashling realized. Not with Joy around. "You're twenty-eight," Ashling retorted. "Yeah, and I sleep with tons of men." More gently, Joy inquired, "Don't you get lonely?" "I'm just out of a five-year relationship, it takes a while to get over something like that." Phelim hadn't been a cruel person, but his inability to commit had had the effect of a scorched-earth policy on Ashling's attitude to love. Since he'd gone, loneliness had whistled through her like a bleak wind, but she was in no way equipped to get involved with a new man. Not that she'd been exactly inundated with offers. "It's nearly a year, you're well over Phelim now. New job, new beginnings. I read somewhere that a hundred and fifty percent of people meet their partners at work. Did you see any sexy men when you had your interview?" Immediately Ashling thought of Jack Devine. A handful. A skilled nerve-shredder. "No." "Pick a card," Joy urged. Ashling split the deck and held a card up. "The Eight of Swords, what does that mean?" Joy asked. "Change," Ashling reluctantly admitted. "Disturbance." "Good, it's long overdue. Right, I'd better go. I'm just going to rub the lucky Buddha to make sure I don't puke on the bus. "Actually," she realized. "Fuck the Buddha.

Loan me money for a taxi?" Ashling handed Joy a tenner and two big plastic bags of rubbish, which seemed to do an embarrassing amount of clinking. "Stick them down the chute for me, thanks." \*\*\* Quarter of a mile away in Malone's Aparthotel, Sunday was hanging heavy on Lisa's hands. She'd read the Irish papers—well, the social pages anyway. And they were pants! They seemed to consist of nothing but pictures of fat, broken-veined politicians, oozing bonhomie and backhanders. Well, they wouldn't be getting into her magazine. She lit yet another cigarette and scuffed moodily about the room. What did people do when they weren't working? They saw their mates, they went to the pub, or the gym, or shopping, or decorating, or they hung out with their blokes. She remembered that much. She longed for a sympathetic ear and thought about ringing Fifi, the closest thing she had to a best friend. They'd been junior editors together on Sweet Sixteen many years ago. When Lisa moved to features on Girl, she wangled Fifi the job of assistant beauty editor. When Fifi got the job of senior features writer on Chic, she tipped Lisa off when they were looking for an assistant editor. When Lisa had left to become assistant editor of Femme, Fifi took over Lisa's position of assistant editor of Chic. Ten months after Lisa became editor of Femme, Fifi became editor of Chic. Lisa had always been able to moan to Fifi—she understood the perils and plights of their so-called glamorous jobs, when everyone else was ugly with envy. But something was stopping Lisa from picking up the phone. She was embarrassed, she realized. And something like resentful. Though their careers had run almost parallel, Lisa had always been farther up the ladder. Fifi's career had been a struggle, but Lisa rose without trace through the ranks. She'd been made an editor nearly a year before Fifi was, and though Chic and Femme were in almost direct competition, Femme's circulation was well over a hundred thousand more. Lisa had blithely assumed that the promotion to Manhattan would propel her so far in front she'd be beyond catching altogether. But instead she was shunted to Dublin and Fifi was suddenly, by default, top dog. Oliver, Lisa gasped, happiness suddenly slotting into place. I'll ring him. But the warm honey tide of good feeling immediately turned to acid. She'd forgotten for a moment. I don't miss him, she tutored herself. I'm just bored and fed up. In the end, she rang her mum—probably because it was a Sunday and therefore traditional—but she felt like shit afterward. Especially because Pauline Edwards was desperate to know why Oliver had rung her looking for Lisa's number in Dublin. "We've split up." Lisa's stomach snarled into a tight walnut of emotion. She didn't want to talk about this— and why hadn't her mum phoned her if she was that concerned? Why did she always have to ring her? "But why have you split up, love?" Lisa still wasn't exactly sure. "It happens,"

she said snippily, desperate to get this dealt with. "Have you tried that counseling thingummy?" Pauline asked tentatively, reluctant to bring the ire of Lisa down on her head. "'Course." Said with terse impatience. Well, they'd gone for one session, but Lisa had been too busy to go to any more. "Will you be getting divorced?" "I should think so." In fact, Lisa didn't know. Apart from what they'd yelled at each other in the heat of anger—"I'm divorcing you." "No, you can't because I'm divorcing you!"—nothing specific had been discussed. In fact, she and Oliver had barely spoken since the split, but, inexplicably, she wanted to hurt her mother by saying it. Pauline sighed unhappily. Lisa's big brother, Nigel, had gotten divorced five years previously. Pauline had had her children late in life, and she didn't understand the ways of their world. "They say that two in three marriages end in divorce," Pauline acknowledged, and abruptly Lisa wanted to yell that she wouldn't be getting divorced and that her mum was a horrible old trout to even suggest it. Pauline's worry for her daughter wrestled with fear of her. "Was it because you were...different...?" "Different, Mum?" Lisa was tart. "Well, with him being... colored?" "Colored!" "That's the wrong word," Pauline amended hastily, then tentatively tried, "Black?" Lisa clicked her tongue and sighed hard. "African-American?" "For crying out loud, Mum, he's English!" Lisa knew she was being cruel, but it was hard to change the habits of a lifetime. "English African-American, then?" Pauline said desperately. "Whatever he is, he's very nice looking." Pauline said this often to show she wasn't prejudiced. Though her heart had nearly stopped with fright the first time she'd met Oliver. If only she'd been warned that her daughter's boyfriend was a hard, gleaming, six-foot-tall black man. Colored man, African-American man, whatever the correct phrase was. She had nothing against them, it was just the unexpectedness of it. And once she'd gotten used to him, she was able to get beyond his color and see that he really was a nice-looking boy. To put it mildly. A huge ebony prince with smooth, lustrous skin, pulled tight over slanting cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes, and thin, swingy dreadlocks that ended at his jawline. He walked as if he was dancing and he smelled of sunshine. Pauline also suspected—though she would never have been able to consciously formulate it—that he was hung like a donkey. "Did he meet someone else?" "No." "But he might, Lisa love. A nice-looking boy like him." "Fine by me." If she said it often enough, it would eventually become true. "Won't you be lonely, love?" "I won't have time to be lonely," Lisa snapped. "I have a career to think of." "I don't know why you need a career. I didn't have one and it didn't do me any harm." "Oh yeah?" Lisa said fiercely. "You could have done with one after Dad hurt his back and we had to live on his disability." "But money isn't

everything. We were ever so happy.” “I wasn’t.” Pauline lapsed into silence. Lisa could hear her breathing over the phone. “I’d best go,” Pauline eventually said. “This must be costing you.” “Sorry, Mum.” Lisa sighed. “I didn’t mean it. Did you get that parcel I sent you?” “Oh yes,” Pauline said nervously. “Face creams and lipsticks. Very nice, thanks.” “Have you used them?” “Weeeell,” Pauline began. “You haven’t,” Lisa accused. Lisa showered Pauline with expensive perfumes and cosmetics that she got in the course of her job. Desperate for her to have a bit of luxury. But Pauline refused to relinquish her Pond’s and Rimmel products. Once she’d even said, “Oh, your things are too good for me, love.” “They’re not too good for you,” Lisa had exploded. Pauline couldn’t understand Lisa’s rage. All she knew was that she dreaded the days when the postman knocked on her door and said cheerfully, “Another parcel from your girl up in London.” Sooner or later Pauline was always called upon to deliver a progress report. Unless it was a parcel of books. Lisa used to send her mum review copies of Catherine Cookson and Josephine Cox, in the mistaken belief that she’d love all that rags-to-riches romantic stuff. Until the day Pauline said, “That was a terrific book you sent me, love, about that East End villain who used to nail his victims to a pool table.” It transpired that Lisa’s assistant had mistakenly parceled up the wrong book, and it marked a new departure in Pauline Edwards’ reading. Now she thrived on gangster biographies and hard-boiled American thrillers, the more torture scenes the better, and someone else’s mum got sent the Catherine Cooksons. “I wish you’d come and see us, love. It’s been ages.” “Um, yeah,” Lisa said vaguely. “I’ll come soon.” No fear! With every visit the house she’d grown up in became smaller and more shockingly dreary. In the poky little rooms crammed with dirt-cheap furniture, she felt shiny and foreign, with her false nails and glossy leather shoes. Uncomfortably aware that her handbag probably cost more than the dralon couch she was sitting on. But though her mum and dad oohed and aahed respectfully over her fabulousness, they were fluttery-nervous around her. She should have dressed down on her visits, to try to narrow the gap. But she needed as much stuff as possible, to wear like a suit of armor, so that she couldn’t be sucked back in, subsumed by her past. She hated it all, then hated herself. “Why don’t you come and see me?” Lisa asked. If they wouldn’t make the half-hour train journey from Hemel Hempstead to London, they were hardly likely to fly to Dublin. “But with your dad not being well and...” \*\*\* When Clodagh woke on Sunday morning she was mildly hungover, but in great form. Briefly at liberty to snuggle up to Dylan and ignore his erection with a clean conscience. Yesterday had been Day 29 in the sex cycle, and she’d done her duty. When Molly and Craig appeared Dylan urged them

sleepily, "Go downstairs and break things, and let Mummy and me have a snooze." Amazingly they left and Clodagh and Dylan drifted in and out of sleep. "You smell lovely," Dylan mumbled into Clodagh's hair. "Like biscuits. All sweet and... sweet..." Sometime later she whispered to him, "I'll give you a million pounds if you get me some breakfast." "What would you like?" "Coffee and fruit." Dylan left and Clodagh stretched like a content starfish across the bed until he reappeared with a mug in one hand and a banana in the other. He placed the banana on his groin facing downward, then when Clodagh looked, he faked a gasp and swung the banana upward, like a quivering erection. "Why, Mrs. Kelly," he exclaimed. "You're beautiful!" Clodagh laughed, but felt the familiar guilt begin its relentless creep. Later they went out for lunch, to one of those places that didn't make you feel like outcasts for bringing along two young children. Dylan went to procure a cushion for Molly to sit on, and as Clodagh wrestled a knife out of Molly's hand, she caught a glimpse of him chatting persuasively with a waitress—a Bambi-limbed teenager—who flushed at her proximity to such a good-looking man. That good-looking man was her husband, Clodagh realized, and suddenly, oddly, she barely recognized him. Assailed by that weird seesaw feeling of knowing someone so well that out of nowhere she didn't know him at all. Familiarity generally dulled the impact of his sunny blond hair, the smile that rippled his skin into layers of parentheses around his mouth, the hazel eyes that were nearly always full of fun. She was surprised and unsettled by his good looks. What was it Ashling had said yesterday? Recapture the magic. Her mind produced an image: she was panting with desire, her groin swollen with want, being laid back in the sand... Sand? No, hold on a minute, that wasn't Dylan, that was Jean-Pierre, the knee-tremblingly seductive Frenchman whom she'd lost her virginity to. God, she sighed, that had been brilliant. She was eighteen, hosteling along the French Riviera, and he'd been the sexiest man she'd ever clapped eyes on. And she had very high standards, she'd never so much as kissed any of the boys she hung around with at home. But the minute she'd seen Jean-Pierre's intense moody stare, beautiful sulky mouth, and loose Gallic body language, she'd decided that he was the one who'd receive the highly prized gift of her virginity. Back to Dylan, the early magic. Ah yes. She remembered almost being in tears as she begged him to do her. "I can't wait, oh please put it in now!" Sliding along the backseat of his car, letting her knees fall apart...No, wait, that hadn't been Dylan either. That had been Greg, the American football player who'd been on a year's scholarship to Trinity. Too bad she'd met him only three months before he went back. He'd been a handsome, sure-of-himself jock, bulky with muscle, and for some reason she'd found him



completely irresistible. Of course she'd felt like that about Dylan, too. She rummaged in her past for specific memories and dusted off her favorite. The first time she'd ever seen him. Their eyes had—literally—met across a crowded room, and before she'd learned the first thing about him, she'd known everything she needed to know. Five years older than Clodagh, he made all the other boys look like spotty, wet-behind-the-ears youths. There was a sureness and an urbane confidence about him that rendered him utterly charismatic. He smiled, he charmed, his very presence was warming, uplifting—and reassuring: even though his business was only starting up, she had cast-iron faith that Dylan would always make everything all right. And he was so yummy! She was twenty years of age, dazzled by his blond good looks and giddy with her good fortune. He was so right for her that there was no doubt but that he was the one she was going to marry. Even when her parents had insisted that she was too young to know her own mind, she'd scorned their advice. Dylan was the one for her, she was the one for Dylan. "There you go, Molly!" He was back with the cushion that three teenage girls had fought over giving to him. It was only then that Clodagh noticed that Molly had poured half the saltcellar into the sugar bowl. After lunch they drove to the beach. It was a bright, blustery day, just warm enough to take off their shoes and paddle in the waves. Dylan got a man walking his dog to take a photo of the four of them clustered together against the clean, empty sand, smiling as the wind whipped their flaxen hair across their faces, Clodagh clasping one side of her skirt to keep it from sticking to her wet legs.

8 Lisa showed up for work at eight o'clock on Monday morning. Start as you mean to go on. But to her disgust the building was locked. She hung around in the damp air for a while and eventually went to get a cup of coffee. Even that took some doing. It wasn't like London, where coffee emporia had their doors open at the break of day. At nine o'clock, when she left the coffee shop, it had started to rain. Her arm over her hair, she hurried along, her four-inch heels skidding on the slick pavement. Suddenly she halted and heard herself screeching at a passing young man in an anorak, "Does it always rain in this naffing country?" "I don't know," he said, nervously. "I'm only twenty-six." At the front door Lisa was greeted by a girl called Trix. She was a rash of goose pimples in a little see-through slip dress and was jigging from high clumpy foot to high clumpy foot to keep warm. When she saw Lisa, her face lit with admiration and she hastily ground her cigarette out. "Howya," she growled, exhaling her last plume of smoke. "Killer shoes! I'm Trix, your PA. Before you ask, my name is Patricia, but there's no point calling me that because I won't answer to it. I was Trixie until the people two doors up got a poodle by the same name, so now I'm Trix.

I used to be the receptionist and general dogsbody, but I've been promoted, thanks to you. Mind you, they haven't replaced me... Over here, the lift is this way. "I'd be the first to admit my typing isn't the best," Trix confided as they went up. "But my lying is fantastic, easily sixty words a minute. I can say you're in a meeting to anyone you don't want to talk to and they'll never suspect. Unless you want them to suspect. I can do intimidation too, see?" Lisa believed her. Though she was twenty-one and peachy-pretty, Trix had a toughness that Lisa recognized. From her own younger days. The first shock of the day was that Randolph Media Ireland only took up one floor—the London offices filled an entire twelve-story tower. "I've to bring you to see Jack Devine," Trix said. "He's the Irish MD, isn't he?" Lisa said. "Is he?" Trix sounded surprised. "I suppose he is. He's the boss anyway, or so he thinks. I take no nonsense from him. "You'd want to have seen him last week." She lowered her voice dramatically. "Like a bear with a sore arse. But he's in good humor today, which means he's back with his girl. The carry-on of the pair of them—they make Pamela and Tommy look like the Waltons." Further shocks were in store for Lisa—Trix led Lisa into an open-plan office with about fifteen desks. Fifteen! How could a magazine empire be run from fifteen desks, a boardroom, and a small kitchen? A horrible thought struck her. "But...where's the fashion department?" "There." Trix nodded at a rail shunted into a corner on which was hanging a dreadful peach jumper that obviously had something to do with Gaelic Knitting, a bridesmaid's dress, a wedding gown, and some men's clothing. Jesus Christ! The fashion department at Femme had taken up an entire room. Crammed with samples from all the High Street shops, it meant that Lisa hadn't had to buy new clothes for several years. Something would have to be done! Already her head was buzzing with plans to get on to her contacts in fashionland—but Trix was introducing her to the two members of staff who were already in. "This is Dervla and Kelvin. They work on other magazines, so they're not your staff. Not like me," she said proudly. "Dervla O'Donnell, pleased to meet you." A large, forty-something woman in an elegant smock shook Lisa's hand and smiled. "I'm Hibernian Bride, Celtic Health, and Gaelic Interiors." Lisa could tell at a glance that this woman was an ex-hippy. "And I'm Kelvin Creedon." A painfully fashionable, peroxide-haired man in black-framed Joe Ninety spectacles grabbed Lisa's hand. She knew immediately that the specs were only for show and the glass in them was clear. Early-twenties, she reckoned he was. He radiated cool, youthful energy. "I'm The Hip Hib, Celtic Car, DIY Irish-style, and Keol, our music magazine." His many silver rings hurt Lisa's hand. "What do you mean?" Lisa asked in confusion. "You edit all of these magazines?" "And research and write them." "All by yourself?" Lisa

couldn't stop herself. She looked from Kelvin to Dervla. "With the help of the odd freelancer," Dervla said. "Sure all we have to do is regurgitate press releases. "It hasn't been so bad since The Catholic Judger went to the wall." Dervla misjudged Lisa's shock for concern. "That gives me Thursday afternoons to work on something else." "Are they weekly or monthly publications?" Dervla and Kelvin turned to each other, their mouths open but silent in a synchronization of uncontrollable laughter to come. They'd never heard anything so funny in their lives. "Monthly!" Dervla heaved, in disbelief. "Weekly!" Kelvin went one better. Then Dervla noticed Lisa's frown and hurriedly calmed down. "No. Twice a year, mostly. The Catholic Judger was weekly, but everything else comes out in spring and autumn. Unless there's some sort of disaster. "Remember Autumn 1999?" She turned to Kelvin. Kelvin obviously did because the laughter started anew. "Computer virus," Kelvin explained. "Wiped everything." "It wasn't funny at the time..." But, clearly, it was now. "Look." Dervla steered Lisa toward a rack on which various glossies were displayed. She handed her a slender volume that declared itself to be *Hibernian Bride*, Spring 2000. That's not a magazine, Lisa thought. That's a pamphlet. A leaflet, in fact. Nothing more than a memo. Hell, it's barely a Post-it. "And this is *Spud*, our food magazine." Dervla handed another pamphlet to Lisa. "Shauna Griffin edits that as well as *Gaelic Knitting* and *Irish Gardening*." Another member of staff had just arrived. Too boring to qualify as even nondescript, Lisa thought in dis-gust—medium height, balding, and wearing a wedding ring. Human wallpaper. She could hardly be bothered to say hello to him. "This is Gerry Godson, the art director. He doesn't talk much," Trix said loudly. "Sure you don't, Gerry? Blink once for yes, twice for fuck off and leave me alone." Gerry blinked twice, and maintained a stony face. Then he smiled widely, shook Lisa's hand, and said, "Welcome to Colleen. I've been working on the other magazines here, but now I'm going to be working exclusively for you." "And me," Trix reminded him. "I'm her PA, you know, I'll be giving the orders." "Jayzus," Gerry muttered good-naturedly. Lisa tried hard to smile. Trix rapped lightly on Jack's door, then opened it. Jack looked up. In repose, his face was slightly mournful and hangdog and his sloe-black eyes held secrets. Then he saw Lisa and smiled in recognition, even though they'd never met. Everything lifted. "Lisa?" The way her name sounded when uttered by him stirred something warm in her. "Come in, sit down." He skirted around his desk and came to shake her hand. Lisa's lead-heavy foreboding gave her some breathing space. She liked the look of this Jack. Tall? Tick! Dark? Tick! Well paid? Tick! He was a managing director, even if it was only of an Irish company. And there was something slightly unorthodox

about him that excited her. Though he wore a suit, she sensed it was under duress and his hair was longer than would have been considered acceptable in London. So what if he had a girlfriend? When had that ever been an impediment? "We're all very excited about Colleen," Jack insisted. But Lisa heard a nugget of weariness at the heart of his statement. His smile had disappeared and he was once more serious and broody. Then he proceeded to tell Lisa about her "team." "There's Trix, your PA, then your assistant editor, a woman called Ashling. She seems very efficient." "So I've heard," Lisa said dryly. Calvin Carter's exact words had been, "You'll provide the vision, she'll do the donkey work." "Then there's Mercedes, who will primarily be the fashion and beauty editor, but will also contribute to general editorial. She's come from Ireland on Sunday—" "What's that?" "A Sunday newspaper. There's Gerry, your art director, who's been working on the other publications. As has Bernard, who'll be handling all the admin, billing, et cetera, on Colleen." Then Jack stopped. Lisa waited for him to tell her about another eight or so staff. He didn't. "Is that it? Five members of staff? Five?" she asked, giddy with disbelief. At Femme her secretary had had a secretary! "You also have a generous freelance budget," Jack promised. "You'll be able to commission stuff and use consultants, both regular and one-offs." Hysteria lunged at Lisa. How had she ended up here, in this awful situation? How? She'd had a plan for her life. She'd always known where she was going and she'd always gotten there. Until now, when she'd been diverted so unexpectedly into this backwater. "Who... who do the other desks belong to, then?" "Dervla, Kelvin, and Shauna, who edit all our other magazines. Then there's my PA, Mrs. Morley, Margie in advertising—she's great, an absolute rottweiler!—the two women in sales, and the two Eugenes in accounts." Lisa was finding it hard to catch her breath, but she had to resist the urge to run to the ladies' and scream into her hands because Ashling, the assistant editor, was being ushered into the office. "Hello again." Ashling smiled warily at Jack Devine. "Hello." He nodded, with nothing like the warmth he'd greeted Lisa with. "I don't believe you've met each other. Lisa Edwards—Ashling Kennedy." Ashling looked momentarily startled, then beamed at Lisa, openly admiring her flawless skin, her nipped-waist power suit, her shimmering ten-denier legs. "I'm delighted to meet you," she declared with nervous animation. "I'm very excited about this magazine." Lisa, on the other hand, wasn't one bit impressed with Ashling. She'd made ordinariness into an art form. We could all let our hair hang there, being neither curly nor straight, if we were so inclined, Lisa thought scornfully. None of us are born with smooth, processed hair, it's something you have to work at. With Trix, although her makeup was a little less than subtle, at least she showed

willingness. Then Mercedes arrived and Lisa wasn't sure about her either. She was sleek and silent, dark and sinuous as licorice. The only one Lisa hadn't met yet was Bernard, and he turned out to be the worst of the lot. The red sleeveless tank top he wore over his shirt and tie was obviously from when it was in fashion the first time around, and frankly that was all she needed to know about him. \*\*\* At ten o'clock, the Colleen team, Jack, and his PA, Mrs. Morley, gathered in the boardroom for a get-to-know-each-other session. Lisa was surprised that Mrs. Morley wasn't a fragrant, efficient, Miss Money Penny type, but a sixtyish, pug-faced dragon. Jack had inherited her, Lisa subsequently discovered, when he took over from the previous managing director. He could have hired a new person, but for whatever reason decided not to, and consequently Mrs. Morley was highly devoted. Too devoted, popular opinion had it. As Mrs. Morley took the minutes, Jack reiterated the brief—Colleen was to be a sexy, sassy read for Irish women aged eighteen to thirty. It should be open-minded, sexually overt, and fun. Everyone was to have a good, hard think about features. "How about a regular piece on meeting men in Ireland?" Ashling piped up nervously. "Perhaps one month do a girl going to a dating agency, another month get her to surf the Net, another month get her to go horseback riding...?" "Not a bad idea," Jack said reluctantly. Ashling gave a wobbly smile. She wasn't sure how long she could keep this sort of thing up—ideas weren't really her strength. The feature had been Joy's suggestion—only because Joy hoped to be the guinea pig. "I'm always trying to meet men, anyway," she'd said. "I might as well get bankrolled while I'm doing it." "Any other thoughts?" Jack prompted. "How about a celebrity letter?" Lisa put forward. "Find some Irish celebrity. Like . . ." Then she was completely stumped, because she didn't know any Irish celebrities. "Like... like..." "Bono," Ashling suggested, kindly. "Or one of the girls from the Corrs." "Exactly," Lisa said. "A thousand words, about flying first class, going to parties with Kate Moss and Anna Friel. Risqué and glam." "Very good." Jack was pleased. But Lisa was back in the horrors. She'd been hit anew by the size of the task ahead of her. To set up a completely new magazine in an unfamiliar country! "And how about an uncelebrity letter?" Trix suggested in her hoarse voice. "You know the sort of thing—I'm an ordinary girl, I got really pissed last night, I'm two-timing my boyfriend, I hate my job, I wish I had more money, I lifted a bottle of nail varnish from Boot's..." Everyone had been nodding enthusiastically until she got to the bit about stealing the nail varnish, then the nodding slowed down and stopped. Everyone had done it, but no one was going to admit to it. Trix noticed immediately and recovered with aplomb. ". . . my ma hates my boyfriend—both of them—I bleached my hair and burned

my scalp, that kind of thing.” “Good idea,” Jack said. “Mercedes, any thoughts?” Mercedes had been doodling, her dark eyes distant and opaque. “I’m going to showcase as many Irish designers as possible. Attend the degree shows of the fashion colleges—” “How parochial is that?” Lisa interrupted, caustically. “We’ve got to feature international designers to be taken seriously.” No way was she going to wear the amateurish, homemade garments run up by Mercedes’s mates in their bedrooms! Proper magazines like *Femme* did photo shoots of exquisite garments sent from the press offices of international fashion houses. The clothes were only on loan, but more than once they’d gotten “lost” after a shoot. Naturally, the models had gotten the blame—let’s face it, didn’t they all have heroin habits to support? Mercedes flicked Lisa a knowing, contemptuous look. To Lisa’s surprise, she was unsettled. “Is that it?” Jack asked. “What about...?” Ashling said slowly, barely trusting herself to speak. She suspected she was having an original thought, but couldn’t be sure. “How about a regular piece by a man? I know it’s a women’s magazine, but could we have a kind of A-to-Z of how a man’s head works? What he really means when he says, ‘I’ll call you.’” “In fact,” Ashling squeaked with excitement, “how about showing the woman’s side, too? A his-and-hers piece?” Jack gave Lisa a questioning eyebrow. “That’s so five minutes ago,” Lisa said shortly. “Is it?” Ashling said humbly. “Oh-kay.” “It’s the twelfth of May today,” Jack concluded the meeting. “The board wants the first issue on the stands for the end of August. That sounds like a long time for those of you who’ve come from weekly publications, but it’s actually not. It’s going to be a lot of hard work. “But fun, too,” he added, because he knew he should. Whomever he was hoping to convince, it certainly wasn’t himself. “And any problems, my door is always open.” “Which isn’t much use if you’re not in your office,” Trix said cheekily. “I mean,” she said hastily as his face darkened, “that you’re often over at the telly studio, keeping the peace.” “Unfortunately”—Jack directed this at Lisa—“our television and radio operation are at different premises, half a mile away. Demands of space mean that my office is here, but I still have to spend a fair amount of time over there. But if you need me and I’m not here, you can always ring me.” “Okay.” Lisa nodded. “And what circulation are we aiming for with *Colleen*?” “Thirty thousand. We may not get that initially, but over six months that’s what we hope to work up to.” Thirty thousand. Lisa was appalled—if the circulation of *Femme* dropped below three hundred and fifty thousand, heads rolled. Then Jack showed Lisa her freelance budget, but something was wrong with it—it seemed to be missing a zero. At least one. That was it. She found herself politely excusing herself from the room and, as though in a dream, gliding to the ladies’, where she locked herself in a cubicle. To

her surprise she found that she was heaving and sobbing. Weeping from disappointment, humiliation, loneliness, for all that she'd lost. It didn't last long—she wasn't really a crier—but when she finally emerged from the cubicle her heart banged hard when she saw someone standing by the basins. Plain and simple Ashling, her hands behind her back. Interfering bitch! "Which hand?" Ashling asked. Lisa didn't understand. "Pick a hand," Ashling said. Lisa felt like smacking her. They were all mad here. "Right or left?" Ashling urged. "Left." Ashling revealed the contents of her left hand to Lisa. A packet of tissues. Then her right hand. A bottle of rescue remedy. "Stick out your tongue." Ashling plopped a couple of drops onto Lisa's nonplussed tongue. "It's for shock and trauma. Cigarette?" Lisa angrily shook her head, then wavered and passively let Ashling stick a cigarette in her mouth and light it for her. "If you want to fix your makeup," Ashling offered, "I've got moisturizer and mascara. It's probably not as good as your usual stuff, but it'll do." Already Ashling was rummaging. "Did someone send you in here?" Lisa was thinking of Jack Devine. Ashling shook her head. "No one guessed but me." Lisa didn't know whether or not to be disappointed. She didn't want Jack to think she was wet, but it would be nice to know he cared... "I'm not usually like this." Lisa's face was hard. "I don't want it mentioned again." "It's forgotten."

9

At the end of the first day Ashling was fit to collapse. Giddy with relief that she didn't have to struggle onto a bus or a train, she staggered straight home. She was lucky. At least she had a home to go to, she realized—Lisa had to go out and hunt one down. Ashling flung herself gratefully into her flat, kicked off her shoes, and checked her answering machine. The red light winked lasciviously and joyously Ashling hit play. She was wild keen for company and connection, to help her process her strange, challenging day. But to her disappointment, all it was was a strange message from someone called Cormac, who would be delivering a ton of mulch on Friday morning. Wrong fucking number. Bodysurfing the couch, she grabbed the phone and rang Clodagh. But as soon as she'd said hello, Clodagh launched into, "I'm having the day from hell." Against a cacophony of yelling, she raised her voice and complained. "Craig has a pain in his tum-tums and all he had for breakfast was half a slice of toast and peanut butter. Then at lunchtime he wouldn't eat a thing and I wondered if I should try him with a chocolate biscuit, even though he goes hyper every time he has sugar, so in the end I gave him a custard cream because I thought that would be slightly better than one with chocolate—" "Uh-huh." Ashling nodded sympathetically as the

howling all but drowned out Clodagh. “—which he ate, so I tried him with another but he just licked off the icing and though he doesn’t have a temperature he’s pale and SHUT UP! LET ME HAVE FIVE SECONDS ON THE PHONE, PLEASE. Oh, bloody hell, I can’t take much more of this!” Clodagh’s plea was ragged and the screeching simply intensified. “Is that Craig?” Ashling asked. It must be quite a stomachache. He sounded like he was being disemboweled. “No, it’s Molly.” “What’s up with her?” Ashling was able to make out some words in all Molly’s bawling. Apparently, Mummy was mean. In fact, it seemed that Mummy was horrible. And Molly didn’t like Mummy. A particularly hysterical bout notified Ash-ling that Molly HATED Mummy. “I’m washing her security blanket,” Clodagh said defensively. “It’s in the machine.” “Oh my good God.” Molly went bananas whenever she was separated from her security blanket. It had once been a tea towel, before Molly’s incessant sucking had rotted it away to a smelly, brown-edged shapeless rag. “It was filthy,” Clodagh said desperately. She turned away from the phone. “Molly,” she beseeched. “It was dirty. Ugh, nasty, pah!” Ashling listened patiently as Clodagh made spitting-yuck noises. “It was a health hazard, it would have made you sick.” The wailing increased a couple of pegs and Clodagh came back on the line. “The old bitch at playschool said Molly wouldn’t be allowed to bring it anymore if it wasn’t washed regularly. What could I do? Anyway, I don’t think it’s appendicitis—” It took Ashling a second to realize they were back to Craig. “—because he hasn’t puked and the family medical encyclopedia says that’s a sure sign. But you think of everything, don’t you?” “I suppose,” Ashling said doubtfully. “Measles, chicken pox, meningitis, polio, E. coli,” Clodagh reeled off miserably. “Hold on, Molly wants to sit on my knee. You can sit on Mummy’s knee if you promise to be quiet. Are you going to be quiet? Are you?” But Molly was making no promises and a series of bangs and shifts indicated that she was being allowed to clamber onto Clodagh’s knee anyway. Mercifully, her shrieking quieted down to ostentatious sniffs and gasps. “And, as if I wasn’t at the end of my rope, fucking Dylan rings to say that not only is he going to be home late again, but that next week he’s got to go to yet another overnight conference.” “Fucking Dylan,” Ashling heard Molly sing-song, with perfect diction. “Fucking Dylan, fucking Dylan.” “... Plus he’s away this Friday at some dinner in Belfast!” More crying started up in the background. Male crying. Fucking Dylan—home early and upset at being sworn at by his wife and daughter? Ashling wondered wryly. No, from the whingey, whiny complaints about a tummy ache, it had to be Craig. “I’ll come over on Friday night,” Ashling offered. “Great, that’s—LEAVE IT! WOULD YOU BLOODY LEAVE IT! Ashling, I have to go,” Clodagh said, and the line went



dead. That was how phone conversations with Clodagh usually ended. Deflated, Ashling sat looking at the phone. She needed to speak to someone. Luckily, Ted was due any minute—she could usually set her watch by his arrival. Six fifty-three. But at ten past seven, when she was halfway through a bag of Kettle chips and Ted hadn't appeared, Ashling began to worry. She hoped he hadn't had an accident. He was a demon on his bike and wouldn't wear a helmet. At half past she rang him. To her surprise he was home! "Why didn't you call in?" "Do you want me to?" "Well... yes, I suppose. It was my first day at my new job today." "Oh shite, I forgot. I'll be right down." Seconds later, Ted appeared—and he looked different. Unquantifiably, but undeniably. Ashling hadn't seen him since Saturday night—remarkable in itself, but she'd been too antsy about the new job to notice until now. Somehow he looked less delicate, more twinklingly robust. Usually he invaded the space of others like an unstoppable force, but there was a straight-backed jauntiness about his posture that was new. "Congratulations on Saturday night," Ashling said. "I think I have a new girlfriend," he admitted, with a bashful ear-to-earer. "At least one, in fact." At Ashling's agog face he elaborated, "I spent yesterday with Emma, but I'm meeting Kelly tomorrow night." Just then Joy arrived. "A watched pot never boils. Half-Man-Half-Badger will never ring if I wait by the phone. Right then! Bill Gates, Rupert Murdoch, or Donald Trump—I thought I'd pick captains of industry in honor of your new job." "But that's easy." Ashling couldn't believe how lightly she'd been let off. "Donald Trump, of course." "Oh really?" Joy was moody. "I thought he was a bit bouffant and blow-dried. I find it hard to respect a man who spends more time on his hair than I do. Well, each to their own." Then she reached in her bag and waved around a bottle of Asti Spumante. "For you. Congrats on the new job." "Asti Spew-mante," Ashling exclaimed. "Thank you." "Spew-mante?" Ted admired. "Spew-mante," Joy confirmed. "Nothing but the best." "So? How was your first day as a glamorous magazine person?" Joy gasped. "I have a nice desk, a nice Apple Mac—" "A nice boss?" Joy asked, meaningfully. Ashling tried to formulate her thoughts. She was fascinated by Lisa's glowing, well-turned-out attractiveness and curious about the unhappiness that throbbed from her. She'd recognized her as the woman in the supermarket with the seven of everything, and she was interested in that, too. But it had been a mistake to follow her to the ladies'. She'd been desperate to help, but she'd ended up being just pushy and insensitive. "She's very beautiful." Ashling didn't want to elaborate on her regret. "And thin and clever and has fantastic clothes." Ted, the freshly minted womanizer, perked up, but Joy said scornfully, "Not that boss. The good-looking man whose girlfriend bit his finger." Ashling felt no

better thinking about Jack Devine. She'd only just started her new job and neither of her superiors seemed keen on her. "How do you know he's good-looking?" she asked. "He just sounds it. Geeky men don't get their fingers bitten." " 'S true," Ted chipped in. "It's never happened to me." But all that might be about to change, Ashling suspected. Joy jogged her. "Your boss?" "He's, um, very serious," Ashling settled for. Then in a splurge she admitted, "He doesn't seem to like me." She felt both better and worse for saying it. "Why not?" Joy enquired. "Yeah, why?" Ted wanted to know. How could someone not like Ashling? "I think it's because I gave him the Band-Aid that day." "What's wrong with that? You were only trying to help." "I wish I hadn't," Ashling realized. "Let's get some food." They rang the local Thai delivery and, as was customary, ordered way too much. Even after they'd eaten till their stomachs were painfully stretched, there was loads left over. "We just always have to go that Pad Thai too far," Ash-ling said regretfully. "Okay, whose fridge do we want to leave the leftovers in for two days before we throw them out?" Joy and Ted shrugged at each other and looked back at Ashling. "Might as well be yours." "I'm worried," Joy announced. "My fortune cookie says I'll suffer a disappointment. Let's read our horoscopes." Then they got out the I Ching and messed around with that for a while, taking several gos until they got the solution they wanted. After they'd tried and failed to find something they all wanted to watch on telly, Joy looked out the window in the direction of Snow, the club across the road. The door whores let them in free because they were local. "Anyone fancy going over the road for a dance?" she suggested, casually. Too casually. "NO!" Ashling said, fear making her emphatic. "I have to be in top form for work in the morning." "I have a job too," Joy said. "The fastest insurance claim processor in the West. Come on, just one drink." "You have no understanding of that concept. I'm surprised you can even say it. If I go out with you for 'just the one' I end up at five in the morning, wrecked out of my head, dancing to Abba, watching the sun come up in a strange apartment with a group of even stranger men that I've never met before and that I never want to see again." "I've never heard you complain before." "Sorry, Joy. I'm probably just a bit anxious about the job." "I'll come with you," Ted offered Joy. "If you're not afraid I'll scare the boys away." "You!" Joy laughed scornfully. "I don't think so."

10 In her cold-lonely bed in the bleak room in Harcourt Street, Lisa tried to sleep, but she felt she was already in the land of nod. And in the middle of a terrible nightmare. After the shocking day at the amateur office, she'd been quietly confident that things couldn't get any worse. That was before she'd tried to find a home to rent. She'd

thought she'd be able to use a relocation agency, but the registration fee was extortionate. And a tactfully worded offer over the phone that she'd give them a nice mention in the magazine if they waived the fee was stonewalled. "We don't need any publicity," the young man's voice told her. "More business than we can handle due to the Celtic tiger." "Celtic what?" "Tiger." The young man had registered that Lisa's accent wasn't an Irish one, so he explained, "Remember when the economies of countries like Japan and Korea were booming they called it the Asian tiger?" Of course Lisa didn't. Words like "economy" just bounced right off her. The young man continued: "And now that Ireland's economy is going through the roof, we call it the Celtic tiger. Which means," he said as tactfully as he could, which wasn't very, "we don't need any free publicity." "Right," Lisa said dully, hanging up the phone. "Thanks for the lecture on economics." On Ashling's advice, she bought the evening paper, scanned the for-rent columns for apartments and mews houses in fashionable Dublin 4, and made appointments to see a few places after work. Then she rang a taxi on the Randolph Media account to take her around them. "Sorry, love," the taxi controller said. "I don't know your name." "Don't worry," Lisa said silkily. "You will." It had been years since she'd used public transport—or paid for a taxi out of her own pocket for that matter. And she didn't intend to start now. The first property was a maisonette in Ballsbridge. It had sounded lovely in the paper—right price, right post code, right facilities. Sure enough, the area seemed nice, with plenty of restaurants and cafés, the quiet tree-lined street was attractive, all the little houses kempt and spruce. As the taxi inched along, looking for number forty-eight, Lisa's spirits lifted for the first time since she'd clapped eyes on Jack. Already she could imagine herself living here. Then she saw it. The only house in the road that looked like it was inhabited by squatters: torn curtains at the window, the grass several feet high, a rusting car on concrete blocks in the drive. She counted along the house numbers from where she was now, wondering which one was forty-eight. Forty-two, forty-four, forty-six, forty-ei... ght. Sure enough, number forty-eight was the house that looked like it had had a demolition order slapped on it. "Oh fuck," she exhaled. She'd forgotten. It was so long since she'd had to look for somewhere to live that it had slipped her mind what a living hell it was. That it was a series of disappointments, each one more crushing than the previous. "Drive on," she ordered. "Right you are," the taxi driver said. "Where are we off to now?" The second place was slightly better. Until a little brown mouse ran along the kitchen floor and disappeared in a wiggle of oily tail beneath the fridge. Lisa's scalp buckled with revulsion. And the third place had described itself as "bijou" when the correct phrase was "ludicrously

tiny." It was a studio, with the bathroom in a cupboard and no kitchen at all. "Tell me now, what would you want with a kitchen? You career women don't have time for cooking," the seal-plump landlord had flattered. "Too busy running the world." "Nice try, fat boy," Lisa muttered to herself. Hopelessly, she trailed back to the taxi, and on the drive home to Harcourt Street had to converse with the driver, who had, by now, decided that they were firm friends. ". . . and my eldest fella is great with his hands. The nicest poor divil in the whole world, he'd do anything for anyone. Changing lightbulbs, assembling tables, cutting grass, all the oul' wans on our road love him..." She was certain the driver was irritating the life out of her, but when she got out of the car, she found she missed him. And now she'd never find out what had happened when he challenged the gang of girls who'd been bullying his fourteen-year-old. Back in her joyless room, her soul gaped in a howl of misery. Everything was made even more hellish by tiredness and lack of food. She was twisted by déjà vu from when she was eighteen, working on a shitty magazine and having no luck trying to rent a half-decent home. Somehow in the board game of life, she'd slithered down a snake and had arrived once more at the beginning. Though back then it had seemed to be a lot more fun. She'd been desperate to escape the mean narrow confines of her home. From the age of thirteen she'd been bunking off school and taking herself up to London to shoplift. Returning home bearing eyeliners, earrings, scarves, and bags, and watched with anxious suspicion by her mother, who didn't dare challenge her. At sixteen she left home and went to London for good. She and her friend Sandra—who achieved instant street-cred by changing her name to Zandra—met up with three gay boys called Charlie, Geraint, and Kevin and moved into their squat in a tower block in Hackney. Where a life of wild fun began. Taking speed, going to the Astoria on a Monday night, Heaven on Wednesday nights, the Clink on Thursday nights. Doctoring their out-of-date bus passes, getting the night bus home, listening to the Cocteau Twins and Art of Noise, meeting people from all over. Clothes were central to their lives and first up was best dressed. Advised by the boys, who had an encyclopedic knowledge of fabulousness at their fingertips, Lisa quickly learned how to look amazing. In Camden Market, Geraint made her buy a red, stretchy-tight Body-Map dress with a cutout on the thigh, which she wore with red-and-white candy-striped tights. Her handbag was a little hard white case with a red cross on it. To complete the outfit, Kevin insisted on nicking her a pair of Palladiums from Joseph—little canvas trainers with a truck-tire sole. Which he got to her only just in time, because he was sacked the following day. On her head Lisa wore a knitted pirate-style hat covered with safety pins—a homemade

pastiche of a John Galliano, knocked together by Kevin, who wanted to be a fashion designer. And Charlie was in charge of her hair. Hair attachments were hot news, so he bleached Lisa's hair white blond and affixed a waist-length blond plait to the crown of her head. One night at Taboo, I-D magazine took her photo. (Though they bought it religiously for the following six months, the picture never appeared, but still.) The squat had almost no furniture, so there was great excitement when they found an armchair in the trash. All five of them ferried it home joyously and took turns to sit in it. Likewise, cups of tea had to be had on a rota basis, because they owned only two mugs between them. But it never occurred to anyone to buy extra ones—a terrible waste of money. The small amounts of cash they had were earmarked for buying clothes, paying into clubs (if there was no way of avoiding it), and buying drinks. All of them eventually got jobs—Charlie as a hairdresser, Zandra in a restaurant, Kevin on the shop floor at Comme des Garçons, Geraint on the door in a cutting-edge club, and Lisa in a High Street clothes shop, where she lifted more of the stock than she actually sold. A wonderful barter system got going. Charlie would do Lisa's hair, she'd steal a shirt for Geraint. Geraint would let them into Taboo for nothing, Zandra would give them free tequila sunrises at the restaurant where she worked. (A mini-barter system was in operation there, because the barman wouldn't insist on dockets from Zandra in exchange for low-grade sexual favors.) The only person who wasn't in the loop was Kevin because the shop he worked at was so expensive yet so minimal that if he nicked one single thing, the entire stock would diminish by 25 percent. But he added general, free-floating kudos to the whole group in these frenzied days of mid-to-late-eighties label worship. None of them would spend money on food—like cups and furniture, that, too, was a waste. If ever they were hungry they'd descend on the restaurant where Zandra worked and demand to be fed. Or else go on a shoplifting spree at their local Safeway. Life continued like this for eighteen months, until the wonderful intimacy began to disintegrate into squabbles and rows. The novelty of having a rota for cup use had begun to wear thin. Then Lisa's magazine-executive boyfriend decided to take a risk and swing her a job on Sweet Sixteen. Though she had no qualifications and barely an education, she was scarily smart. She knew what was in, what was on its way out, who was worth knowing, and she always looked spectacularly, astonishingly, just-this-minute fashionable. Seconds after something had appeared in Vogue, Lisa was arrayed in a cut-price version of it, and most importantly of all, dressed with conviction. Many people wore puffball skirts because they knew they should, but most of them couldn't shake the accompanying air of confusion and shame. Lisa sported hers with

aplomb. Then, as now, the magazine she was working on was low-budget crap and it was hard to find a flat that she could afford to rent. But the difference was that back then having a shit job on a magazine was thought to be fantas-tic—being employed by a magazine at all was what was important. And trying to find a half-decent place to live was a huge step forward—after living in the squat. Those were circumstances to be savored. A source of pride, not embarrassment. Even though she was at the bottom of the heap, she was still the success story of Five Live in a Squat in Hackney. Back in the nightmarish present, Lisa climbed into her hotel-room bed and smoked cigarette after cigarette, waiting for the Rohypnol to deliver four hours of merciful oblivion. But 'round and 'round the same ugly thoughts went. She was appalled at the huge task ahead of her on Colleen and hated being here. But there was no way out. She couldn't return to London. Even if there was an editor's job going—which there wasn't at the mo-ment—you're only as good as your last ABC audit. She'd have to make Colleen a surefire success before anyone else would employ her. Trapped. She picked up the foil card of Rohypnol and suddenly suicide seemed gloriously tempting. Would sixteen tablets be enough to kill herself? Probably, she decided. She could just close her eyes and eddy away from everything. Go out on a blaze of glory, while her name was still a byword for successful, high-circulation magazines. Preserve her reputation for all eternity. She'd always been a survivor, and had never before contemplated suicide—and she was only doing so now because dying seemed the most appropriate way to survive. But the more she thought about it, the more killing herself wasn't an option: everyone would simply think she'd cracked under the pressure and they'd gloat like mad. She squirmed, thinking of every magazine person in Britain showing up at her funeral, bringing their murmury sound track of "She couldn't hack it, you know. Poor girl, couldn't stay the pace." Turning to one another in their sleek black suits—they wouldn't even have to change out of their work clothes for the funeral—and congratulating themselves that they were still, by virtue of being alive, players. No burnout here, no sir! Not being able to stay the pace was the worst crime in magazine publishing. Worse than hitting the burgers hard and becoming a size twelve, or telling the world that short hair was in when everyone else's money was riding on shoulder-length locks. Working on the principle that there was only so much endurance knocking around, magazine folk joyously embraced the news that a colleague was "taking a long, well-deserved rest" or "spending more time with their family." A tragic accident was the only way out, Lisa decided. A glamorous tragic accident, she amended. Forget falling under a low-rent Irish bus; that would be even more embarrassing

than topping herself. She'd have to fall out of a speedboat, at the very least. Or crash in an orange ball of flame while helicoptering to some fuck-off location. . . . She was on her way to Manoir aux Quat' Saisons, I believe. Actually, I heard it was Balmoral Castle. At the personal request of you-know-who.

But what a fitting way to go. Fabulous in death as in life. Burned to a crisp, I'm told, like an overdone steak. The super-bitchy tones of Lily Headly-Smythe, editor of *Panache*, interrupted Lisa's sleepy reverie. . . . Rumor has it that Vivienne Westwood's going to base her next collection on it; all the models will be done up like burn victims. Fantasy back on track, Lisa eventually fell asleep, comforted by thoughts of her society-pages death. 11 The week carried on. Lisa moved through her gray-bordered life like a sleepwalker. Albeit a well-dressed, bossy one. On Friday, the rain stopped and the sun came out, which caused great excitement among the staff—they were like children on Christmas morning. As they arrived into work, there was a stream of comments. "Glorious day." "Aren't we blessed with the weather?" "Fabulous morning." Just because it had stopped flaming raining, Lisa thought, with contempt. "Remember last summer?" Kelvin shouted across the office to Ashling, his eyes sparkling gleefully behind his black-framed fake glasses. "Indeed I do," Ashling replied. "It was on a Wednesday, wasn't it?" Everyone roared laughing. Everyone except Lisa. Midmorning, Mai tripped gracefully into the office, flashed a sly, sweet smile around, and asked, "Is Jack in?" Lisa experienced a small thrill. This was obviously Jack's girl and what a surprise. Lisa had expected some pale, freckly Irish girl, not this coffee-colored little piece of exotica. Ashling, standing at the photocopier, copying several million press releases for distribution to every clothes designer and cosmetic manufacturer in the universe, paid attention also. It was the finger-biter, looking as though butter wouldn't melt in her cherry-plump mouth. "Have you an appointment?" Mrs. Morley drew herself up to her full four foot eleven, intimidatingly extending her enormous bosom. "Tell him it's Mai." After a long, hard glare, Mrs. Morley trundled away. While she waited, Mai absently twirled a slender finger in her heavy hair, looking every inch a wet dream. Then Mrs. Morley was back. "You can go in," she said, her disappointment obvious. Mai passed through the office in lemon-scented silence, and the second Jack's door closed behind her, there was a collective release of breath and a clamor of talk. "That's Jack's girlfriend," Kelvin informed Ashling, Lisa, and Mercedes. "More trouble than she's worth, if you ask me," Mrs. Morley said grimly. "I'm not so sure about that, Mrs. Morley," Kelvin said lasciviously. Mrs. Morley turned away with a disgusted sniff.

“She’s half Irish, half Vietnamese,” silent Gerry piped up. “They fight like cats and dogs,” Trix thrilled. “She’s really violent.” “Well, that’s not her Vietnamese side,” Dervla O’Donnell said firmly, delighted to abandon Hibernian Bride for a moment. “The Vietnamese are a very gentle hospitable people. When I was traveling there—” “Ah, here,” Trix moaned. “The ex-hippy’s having another ’Nam flashback. I feel rigor mortis kicking in.” Ashling continued to collate her press releases, but the photocopier groaned slowly, made a few clicks that it shouldn’t have, then ground into unwelcome silence. The display panel flashed a yellow message. “PQ03?” Ash-ling questioned. “What does that mean?” “PQ03?” The older office members looked at one another. “Haven’t a clue!” “That’s a new one.” “But be grateful for small mercies. It usually breaks down after two copies.” “What should I do?” Ashling asked. “These press releases have to go out in the post tonight.” She glanced at Lisa, hoping she’d let her off the hook. But Lisa’s expression remained smooth and closed. At the end of the first week it was clear to Ashling that Lisa was a slave driver with huge vision for the magazine. Great in many ways, but not if you’re the person landed with the responsibility of single-handedly implementing every one of Lisa’s ideas. “No point asking any of these eejits to fix it.” Trix nodded scornfully at Gerry, Bernard, and Kelvin. “They’d only make things worse. Jack’s fairly handy with machinery. “Though I wouldn’t disturb him at the moment,” she added meaningfully. “I’ll do something else.” Ashling returned to her desk, momentarily paralyzed by the volume of work on it. She decided to press on with her list of the hundred most sexy, interesting, talented Irish people. Everyone from DJs to hairdressers to actors to journalists. And as quick as Ashling was coming up with names, Trix was arranging for Lisa to have breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, or dinner with them—Lisa was on a crash course to infiltrate the movers and shakers of Irish society. “After all those meals you’ll be the size of a house.” Trix laughed. Lisa smiled scornfully. Just because you ordered food didn’t mean you had to eat it. The office hummed with work until Jack’s office door opened and Mai exited at high speed. Instantly, everyone jerked their heads up in anticipation, and they weren’t disappointed. Mai made a violent attempt to slam the exit door behind her, but it was wedged permanently open, so she had to satisfy herself with giving it an angry kick. Seconds later, Jack came out, also going at high speed. His eyes were dark, his face was like thunder, and his long legs were gaining fast on Mai. But halfway through the office he seemed to come to his senses and slowed down. “Ah, fuck it,” he muttered, and banged his fist down on the photocopier. There was a whirring noise, then a click, then page after page began to flop out of the machine. The photocopier was working again! “We have the technology! Jack



Devine saves the day,” Ashling declared, and started to clap. The others followed suit. Jack glared around at them as the entire office applauded, and then, to everyone’s surprise, he began to laugh. Instantly, he looked like a different person— younger and nicer. “This is madness,” he muttered. Ashling quite agreed. Jack hovered uncertainly. Should he follow Mai or... Then, on Ashling’s desk, he saw the pack of Marlboros, a cigarette extended from the box. The office was technically nonsmoking, but by general consensus, everyone smoked. Except for Boring Bernard, who surrounded himself with thank you for not smoking signs. He’d even gotten himself a little fan. With a raise of his eyebrows, Jack indicated a silent “Can I?” and extracted the cigarette with his lips. Striking a match, he lit the cigarette, extinguished the match with a firm flick of his hand, then inhaled deeply. Ashling followed all of his movements, unable to look away. “Looks like I picked the wrong girl to quit smoking.” Jack trailed back to his office. “I need your help, girls,” Dervla O’Donnell boomed, distracting everyone. She leaped up from Hibernian Bride’s autumn fashion spread, her large-is-lovely silk-knit three-piece swishing as she began pacing. “What will the well-dressed wedding guest be wearing in autumn 2003? What’s hot, what’s happening, what’s now?” “Well, I see chins are definitely in, dear.” Lisa twinkled, and with a tilt of her head, indicated Dervla’s plentitude of chinnage. A gasp of shock from the office segued seamlessly into laughter, uplifting Lisa. She was proud of her clever, bitchy tongue and the power it gave her. Dervla stood stock-still in astonishment as all around her, colleagues laughed, then she, too, attempted a good sport’s smile. \*\*\* Lisa was the last one out of the office on Friday evening. The streets were thronged and the setting sun was dazzling. Picking her way through the good-humored revelers spilling out of pubs onto the streets of Temple Bar, she headed determinedly for Christchurch. But memories tugged faintly at her. Of other sunny Friday evenings. Sitting with Oliver by the river in Hammersmith, sipping cider, peaceful and free after a hard week. Had that really been her? She pushed Oliver away and tried to think of something else, then sticking out from under a pub table she saw a pair of white shins, crisscrossed with red lines. Trix! At lunchtime, in honor of the blue sky and above-freezing temperature, Trix had shaved her legs in the ladies’ and bared them, bloodied but unbowed to the world. She’d nearly cleared Ashling out of Band-Aids. Lisa hurried on, pretending she hadn’t seen Ashling waving to her to come and join them. The good weather had obviously put Ashling in mind of defoliating her legs, too, because Lisa had overheard her booking a lunchtime leg wax. Oddly enough, though, she hadn’t tried to swing a freebie. It seemed she was just going to go in as a civilian and pay the going

rate. But if Ashling didn't have the nous to use—okay, abuse—her position as assistant editor of a women's magazine, it wasn't Lisa's job to wise her up. There had never been much chance that Lisa would be friendly to someone as ordinary as Ashling. But because Ashling had caught her crying and treated her as though she needed tenderness, Lisa disliked her immensely.

She disliked Mercedes, too, for totally different reasons. Mercedes, silent and self-possessed, rattled her. When Ashling had hung up from booking her leg wax, Lisa had made the whole office laugh by saying, "Now your turn to book one, Mercedes. Unless, of course, gorilla legs are in this summer." Mercedes shot Lisa a black look, so dark that Lisa held back what she'd been about to say next, which was that with her coloring, Mercedes was an ideal candidate for sideburns and a mustache. "Hey, it's a joke." Lisa smiled bitchily at Mercedes, compounding the damage by making her seem like a bad sport as well as hairy. To piss off both Ashling and Mercedes, Lisa was extra sweet to Trix. It was a power-generating technique she'd used in the past—divide and conquer. Select a pet, shower her with intimacy, then suddenly abandon her in favor of another. Rotating the position engendered love and fear. Except for Jack. She was going to be nice to him all the time. He was the only thing in her life that was giving her hope. She'd discreetly studied how he responded to her and it was different from the way he treated the other female staff. He was amused by Trix, polite to Mercedes, and seemed to positively dislike Ashling. But to Lisa he was respectful and solicitous. Admiring even. And so he should be. She'd been getting up even earlier than usual this week, taking extra care with her already pampered appearance, expertly applying gossamer-thin layer after gossamer-thin layer of fake tan to give her a golden glow. Lisa was clear-eyed about her looks. In her natural state—not that she'd been in that for a very long time—she was a pretty enough girl. But with huge amounts of effort she knew she'd upgraded herself from attractive to fabulous. As well as the usual attention to hair, nails, skin, makeup, and clothes, she popped huge amounts of vitamins, drank sixteen glasses of water a day, only snorted cocaine on special occasions, and every six months had a Botox injection in her forehead—it paralyzed the muscles and gave a lovely wrinkle-free appearance. For the past ten years she'd been constantly hungry. So hungry that she barely noticed it now. Sometimes she dreamed about eating a three-course meal, but people do the oddest things in dreams! Despite her confidence in her looks, Lisa had to admit that Jack's girlfriend had come as a bit of a shock. Lisa had blithely assumed that she was being pitted against an Irish girl, which would be a cakewalk. But she wasn't too discouraged.

Tearing Jack away from his passionate, exotic girlfriend was currently one of the least taxing aspects of her life. Desolately, she trailed back to her horrid little hotel, wishing Trix had been able to fix up a dinner with someone semifamous for this evening. She hated having free time; her ability to process it had atrophied. Though it hadn't been that way forever— she'd always worked hard and been ambitious, but once upon a time there had been something more. Before the constant looking over her shoulder at the hordes of younger, smarter, tougher, more ambitious girls swarming up behind her had distilled her life to a focused treadmill. She had a few more flats and houses to look at this weekend—the time would pass fast enough. And tomorrow she was showcasing a couple of hairdressers, getting her color done in one and having it cut in another. The trick was to have a few that were cravenly obligated to you so that if one couldn't squeeze you in for an emergency blow-dry, another could. She'd made a bargain with herself. She'd give herself a year to make a rip-roaring success of this joke of a magazine, then surely the powers that be in Randolph Media would recognize her contribution and reward it. Maybe... After three speedy postwork drinks, Ashling got up to leave, but Trix implored her to stay out. "C'mon, let's get twisted and bond by trashing everyone we work with!" "I can't." "You can," Trix urged earnestly. "All you have to do is try." "That's not what I mean." But Trix had a point. While Ashling certainly had bitchy thoughts, she rarely gave vent to them because she had an edgy suspicion that what goes around comes around. No point trying to explain that to Trix, though, she'd laugh her head off. "I mean I'm going to see my friend Clodagh." "Get her to come here." "She can't. She's got two kids and her husband's in Belfast."

Only then would Trix relinquish her. Ashling jostled through the Friday night throng and hailed a taxi. Fifteen minutes later she arrived at Clodagh's, for pizza, wine, and a bitching session about Dylan. "I hate when he goes away to these bloody dinners and conferences," Clodagh exclaimed. "And he goes to far too many for my liking." This hung in the air until Ashling said anxiously, "You don't think he's... up to something?" "No!" Clodagh chuckled. "I didn't mean that. I just mean I envy his, his... freedom. I'm stuck here with the pair of them while he's in some fancy hotel getting an uninterrupted night's sleep and a bit of privacy. What wouldn't I give . . ." She trailed off wistfully. Later on in bed, after she'd nervously locked doors and windows, Clodagh found herself thinking about what Ashling had said about Dylan's being up to something. He wouldn't, would he? Have an affair? Or the occasional anonymous, away-from-home shag? Fast, furious, and faceless? No, she knew he wouldn't. Apart from anything else, she'd kill him. But in a strange little way, the thought of Dylan having sex with someone else turned her on. She thought about it some more, shuffling through a few familiar fantasies. Would they do it like she and Dylan did? Or would it be more inventive? Wilder? Faster? More passionate? As she visualized the porn-movie scenarios, her breathing quickened, and when she was ready, she gave herself a couple of quick, intense orgasms, then fell into a deeply content sleep until she was woken by Molly needing to do a wee-wee.

## 12

Ashling spent all Saturday afternoon traipsing around the shops, looking for a smart, sexy suit for work. What she actually wanted, though she was only dimly aware of it, was to look like Lisa. Perhaps then she'd feel deserving of her new job and the anxiety that dogged her might lift. But no matter what she tried on, Lisa's effortless lacquered élan eluded her. As closing time loomed, she made a couple of desperation purchases and staggered home, exhausted and dissatisfied. The boy wasn't actually in her doorway, he was crouched beside it on his orange blanket. It was the first time Ashling had seen him awake. Some passersby threw him a coin, some more threw him a look that was a mix of disgust and fear, but most people genuinely didn't see him. They had airbrushed him out of their reality. She had to pass within inches of him to get to her front door and was uncomfortably unsure of what the correct etiquette was, but felt she should say something. After all, they were neighbors. "Um, hi," she grunted, her eyes sliding quickly over his. "Hiya." He grinned up at her. He was missing a front tooth. As she walked past him, he nodded at her glossy shopping bag. "Did you get anything nice?" She froze,

halfway between him and her door, desperate to escape. "Ah, not really. Just a couple of things for work, you know." She wanted to cut her tongue out—how would he know? "What's that they say?" He squinted his eyes in thought. "Don't dress for the job you have, dress for the job you want. Is that right?" Ashling was too mired in embarrassment to focus. "Would you...?" She shrugged her rucksack off her shoulder, her progress to her purse impeded by the large, glossy bag strewn across her. "Would you like...?" She gave him a pound, which he accepted with a gracious inclination of his head. Flushed with shame at the disparity between what she'd given him and what she'd just spent on a shirt and a handbag she didn't even need, she thumped angrily up the stairs. I work hard for my money, she fumed. Extremely hard, she amended, thinking of the week she'd just had. And I haven't bought anything in ages. And it's all on credit anyway. And it's not my fault he's an alcoholic or a heroin addict. Although, in fairness, she hadn't smelled alcohol from him and he hadn't seemed out of it on anything. Safe in her flat, with the door slammed protectively behind her, she exhaled. There but for the grace of God go I, she thought. I could have ended up on the streets. And then she scolded herself for such melodrama. Things had never been that bad. She flung her bag on the table and her shoes on the floor, wrecked after her day. And now she was expected to put on her party clothes and go out with Joy. She'd love not to. Being a thirty-something was like experiencing adolescence in reverse. Her body was changing and often she was struck by strange, sometimes shameful urges. Like wanting to stay in on her own on a Saturday night, with only a video and a tub of Ben & Jerry's for company. "But you'll never meet a man if you don't go out," Joy regularly complained. "I do go out. Anyway, I've got Ben and Jerry. They're the only men I need." But tonight she had to go out. For the first issue of Colleen, she and Joy were going to a salsa club to report on the chances of meeting men there. She'd never had to do anything of the sort for Woman's Place and there were times, like right now, when she dearly missed her old job. Not just because she'd never had to give up a Saturday night for her old job. But because she could have done her stuff in Woman's Place in her sleep, while her duties in Colleen still weren't entirely clear. She feared she could be told to do anything and her stomach was twisted into a knot as she waited to be told to do something that she wasn't able to. Ashling liked certainty and the only thing certain about working at Colleen was that she hadn't a clue what was coming next. Nerve-racking! Exciting, she corrected. And glamorous. And it was a great laugh working with so many new people—in her old job there had only been three other full-time staff. But then again, they'd all been sweethearts. No awkward types like

Lisa or Jack Devine. But none as good fun as Trix or Kelvin either, she reminded herself firmly. Now was not the time to go all nostalgic and pathetic. She stuck a bag of popcorn in the microwave, then flung herself on the couch, watched *Blind Date*, and prayed for Joy not to come. She'd been up till six in the morning playing with Half-Man-Half-Badger, perhaps she'd be too unwell to go out. No chance. Though she was more fragile than usual. "I'd like a cup of tea," she said, when she arrived. "Plenty of sugar." "That bad?" "I've the shakes. Worth it, though. I'm mad about Half-Man-Half-Badger, Ashling. But he was supposed to ring me today and—oh no, this milk tastes sour. Fuck! I bet I'm pregnant. In nine months' time I'll give birth to a half-baby-half-badger." "No," Ashling said, looking into her cup, in which little white flecks were floating. "I just think the milk is sour." Joy flung open the fridge and examined the four cartons of milk within, all of them past their use-by date. "What are you doing?" she demanded. "Playing Russian roulette with the milk? Running a yogurt factory? And have you eaten?" Ashling indicated the almost empty bowl of popcorn. "You're funny. In some ways you're so organized, but in others..." "One can't be good at everything. I'm well balanced." "You should take better care of yourself." "That's like the dog calling the cat's arse hairy!" "But you'll get scurvy." "I take vitamins. I'm fine. Where's Ted?" Ashling had barely seen Ted all week. Not only did they work in opposite directions now, so that he no longer gave her a backer to work, but since the owl triumph he'd been sampling his way through the girls who'd expressed interest in him. Though he'd annoyed the shite out of her when he'd been a constant fixture in her flat whining about not having a girlfriend, Ashling missed him and resented his newfound independence. "You'll see Ted later. We're invited to a party. Architecture students. One of them does a bit of stand-up, so some of the comedians should be there. And where there are comedians, Half-Man-Half-Badger is usually to be found!" "I'm not so sure about the party," Ashling said cautiously. "Especially if it's students." "We'll see," Joy said easily—too easily. Ashling flicked her a nervous glance. "I can't believe I'm putting makeup on again," Joy said, curving on lipstick without the aid of a mirror, then turning her lips inward, blotting them against each other with a panache that Ashling envied. "Don't forget the camera." As they hit the streets, Ashling looked for the homeless boy, but he and his orange blanket were nowhere to be seen.

"Single women and homosexuals." Joy summed up the fifty-strong crowd in one hawk-eyed sweep. "A dead loss, but as we're here we might as well get drunk. How much expenses have we?" "Expenses?" Joy shook her head and sighed. There was an hour's class before the

club began. The instructor, who introduced himself as “Alberto, from Cuba,” was a fairly nondescript-looking man. Until he started to dance. Sinuous and lithe, graceful and sure, he was suddenly beautiful. Strutting, pointing, swiveling on the ball of his foot, he demonstrated the steps they’d be attempting. “The state of your man,” Joy complained crossly. “Ssshhh!” Ashling loved to dance. Despite her square waist she had a great sense of rhythm, so when the joyous, sunshiny trumpet music started again and Alberto instructed, “Everyone, join me,” she needed no second bidding. The steps were basic enough. It was the panache with which you did them that mattered, Ashling realized, mesmerized by Alberto’s lubricated hips. Most of the class were lumpish and clumsy—Joy in particular from lack of sleep and a hangover—and Alberto seemed genuinely distressed by how atrocious everyone was. Ashling, however, picked up the moves smoothly. “Wasn’t this a fantastic idea?” she declared to Joy, her eyes shining. “Feck off.” “Smile for the camera! And look as if you’re dancing.” Joy did a couple of clubfooted steps while Ashling snapped, then Joy took over the camera. “Try and photo some men for the article,” Ashling hissed at her. After the class, the club began properly. Experienced salsa and merengue dancers began to flood in, the women in short, flared skirts and high T-bar shoes, the faces of the men impassive as they expertly twirled and maneuvered women to the loud upbeat rhythms. “I can’t believe this is Ireland,” Ashling whispered to Joy. “Irish men! Dancing! And not just the twelve-pints-of-Guinness shuffle, either.” “Real men don’t dance,” Joy complained, keen to leave. “These ones do.” Salsa was very much a contact sport. Ashling homed in on one couple. They danced right up close, as if their bodies had been Velcro’d together. Below the waist their limbs were a blur, but above the waist they barely moved. Groin to groin, chest to chest, his left hand held her right one above their heads, the soft skin of their inner arms joined along the full length. His right hand was firmly on the small of her back. All the while their feet perfectly performed the complicated steps, the man gazed into the woman’s eyes. Their heads remained still. Ashling had never seen anything so erotic in all her life. A bud of yearning yawned open within her and it felt like pain. Stirred by a nameless need, she watched the dancers, her mouth bittersweet with longing. But for what? The hard, sweet heat of a man’s body? Perhaps... Jolting her from her introspection, a man asked Ash-ling to dance. He was short and going bald. “I’ve only had one lesson,” she offered, hoping to get out of it. But he assured her he wouldn’t do anything too complicated—and then they were off! It was like driving a car, Ashling decided. One minute you’re static, the next you’re moving smoothly, all because of what you’re doing with your feet. Forward and back, they

stepped and swayed, he twirled her away from him, she returned smoothly and without missing a beat recommenced the dance, forward and back, dipping and flowing. It gave her some inkling of what it must be like to be able to do it well. "Well done," he told her at the end. "Can we go?" Joy said tersely, when Ashling returned to her seat. "What a waste of time this was. Not a man in sight. Just one dance with a short-arse slaphead to show for our trouble." Oh, go on, please, just for five minutes," Joy begged. "I don't know where I stand with Half-Man-Half-Badger and he's bound to be there. Please." "Five minutes, I mean it, Joy, that's all I'm staying." The party—like most student parties in Dublin—was held in Rathmines, in a four-story, redbrick Georgian house that had been converted into thirteen tiny oddly shaped flats. It had the obligatory high ceilings, original features, peeling paint, and overpowering smell of damp. The first person Ashling saw when she walked in was the enthusiastic bloke who'd given her the note saying "Bellez-moi." "Shite," she exhaled. "What?" Joy hissed, terrified that Ashling had spotted Half-Man-Half-Badger snogging someone else. "Nothing." "There he is!" Joy noticed. Leaning against a wall—a risky business in these jerry-converted flats—was her quarry. She slipped her moorings and was gone. Suddenly alone, Ashling gave Bellez-Moi a cheesy, sweaty-apologetic grin. To her great alarm, instead of repelling him, it sent him hurtling toward her. "You never called me," he declared. "Mmm." She tried another smile while inching away. "Why not?" She opened her mouth to launch into a long list of lies. I lost the piece of paper, I'm deaf and dumb, there was a typhoon in Stephen's Street and the phone lines were down... Unexpectedly, she had it. "I can't speak French," she said triumphantly. How about that for a watertight excuse? He smiled the wistful smile of one who knows when he's not wanted. "I'm sure you're very nice and everything," she added hastily, keen not to cause any hurt. "But I didn't know you and—" "Well, you're never likely to if you don't ring me," he pointed out, pleasantly. "Yes, but . . ." Then she hit on something. "Isn't it more traditional for the man to ask for the woman's number, and for him to phone her?" "I was trying to be liberated, but right you are, then, can I have your number?" He has freckles, she thought, wondering how to get out of this. She didn't want to give her number to an enthusiastic man with freckles. But he had his pen out and his eyes were keen and warm. She swallowed away the rage of being put in such a spot. Pushed it down, buried it. "Six, seven, seven, four, three, two—" She wavered over the final digit. Should she say "two" when it was actually "three"? The moment took forever. "Three," she said, in a sigh. "And your name?" His smile flashed bright in the darkened room. "Ashling." What was his name? Something silly. Cupid, or something. "Valentine," he said. "Marcus



Valentine. I'll call you." This was one instance, Ashling secretly feared, when "I'll call you" meant just that. Why did the awful ones always ring and the good-looking ones never? Through the crowds she spotted Joy conversing energetically with Half-Man-Half-Badger. Good, now she could go home. "See ya," she said to Marcus. She was too old for this studenty-type shite. On the way out she tripped over Ted, talking to a gamine redhead. He was smiling a smile Ashling didn't recognize: no longer a panting, please-love-me rictus, but something more contained. Even his body language had altered. Instead of bending forward, he tilted away slightly, so the girl had to lean toward him. "Howya." Ashling greeted him with a punch to his upper arm. "Ashling!" Excitedly he tried to trip her up. Greetings having been exchanged, he turned to the little redhead. "Suzie, this is my friend Ashling." Suzie gave a suspicious nod. "Have you a drink?" Ted asked Ashling. "No, I'm not staying. I'm knackered." Indecision zigzagged across Ted's thin face before he surprised everyone by saying, "Hold on, I'll come with you." Outside, in the cool night air, Ashling exclaimed, "What are you at? She was into you." "No point being too eager." Ashling felt a pang. She and Ted used to take it in turns to be the walking wounded. His newfound confidence had altered things between them. "Anyway, she's a comedy groupie," he said. "I'll see her again." You couldn't get a taxi in Dublin for love nor money on a Saturday night. Those that lived in distant suburbs tried to beat the four-hour lines by walking out of town in the hope of flagging a taxi on its way back in. Which meant that on Ted and Ashling's walk home into town, there was a constant stream of Night of the Living Dead-style drunken zombies lurching in their dozens toward them. "So how's the job going?" Ted asked, sidestepping another zigzagging reveler. Ashling hesitated. "Great in lots of ways. It's glamorous. Sometimes. When I'm not cross-eyed from photocopying press releases, that is." "Have you found out why the Mercedes girlie is called after a car?" "Her mother is Spanish. Actually, she's very nice, once you talk to her," Ashling elaborated. "She's just quiet and extremely posh. Married to a rich fella, hangs around with a horsey crowd, and I get the impression her job is only a hobby. But she's nice." "And how are you getting on with the boss man who doesn't like you?" Ashling's stomach tightened. "He still doesn't like me. Yesterday he called me Little Miss Fixit just because I offered him two aspirins for his headache." "The bollocks. Maybe you were enemies in a former life and that's why you don't get on in this one." "Do you think so?" Ashling exclaimed. Then took one look at Ted's grinning face. "Oh, you don't, I see. O ye of little faith. The next time you want your future foretold, don't come to me." "Sorry, Ashling." He flung his arm confidently around her neck. "Well, this

will cheer you up—I'm doing a gig at the River Club next Saturday night, will you come?" "Didn't I just say that I'm not foretelling your future? You'll just have to wait and see."

13

On Monday morning Craig followed his mother around the room whining, "Why are you tidying?" Clodagh snatched up a snarl of tights and flung them in the linen basket, then launched herself on the mountain of clothes on the bedroom chair, her arms a blur as she tossed jumpers into drawers, dressing gowns onto pegs, and—after a short hesitation where everything became just too much—everything else under the bed. "Is Grandma Kelly coming?" Craig pestered. He fully expected the answer to be in the affirmative—this sort of frenzy was usually followed a short time afterward by a visit from Dylan's mother. "Nope." Craig ran behind Clodagh as she Tasmanian-Deviled into the en suite bathroom, and noisily jostled a toilet brush around the bowl. "Why?" he demanded. "Because," she hissed, irritated at the stupidity of the question, "because the cleaning lady is coming. "Molly, hurry," Clodagh roared in the direction of Molly's elephant-freized room. "Flor will be here any minute." The thought of staying in the house while Flor did her stuff was beyond the pale. Not just because all Flor wanted to talk about was her womb, but because Flor's very presence made Clodagh feel horribly middle-class and exploitative. She was young and able-bodied—having her house cleaned by a fifty-eight-year-old woman with problems up the frock was indefensible. She'd tried staying in for a couple of Flor's visits, but ended up feeling like an outlaw in her own home. It seemed that every room she went into, Flor arrived seconds later, girt about with vacuum cleaners and varicose veins, and Clodagh never quite knew what to say. "Ah . . ." followed by an uneasy smile. "I'll just, er, move, ah, out of your way." "Not at all," Flor would insist. "Stay right where you are." Only once had Clodagh taken Flor at her word, and sat flicking through an interiors magazine, pulsing with shame, while Flor huffed and puffed with the vacuum around her feet. Flor charged five pounds an hour. Guilt compelled Clodagh to pay her six. So uncomfortable did she feel that Clodagh couldn't bear to even see Flor, always making it her business to be well gone before she arrived. "Molly," she bellowed, thundering down the stairs. "Hurry!" In the kitchen, one eye on the clock, she grabbed her pile of wallpaper samples and scribbled a note to Flor on the back of one. In a couple of strokes she drew a vac-u-um—an upstanding rectangle with a twirly lead snaking from it. Then she sketched a few squares and drew rainfall coming down on top of them. Then she drew two ar-rows—one pointing to the pile of shirts on the table, the other pointing to the

duster and Pledge next to them. Now Flor would know that Clodagh wanted her to vacuum, to wash the kitchen floor, to iron clothes, and to dust and polish. Anything else? Clodagh did a quick zoom around her head. Next door's cat, that's what. She didn't want Flor letting him in like she had the week before. Tiddles Brady had made himself so comfortable he was practically watching telly with the remote control in his paw when she'd got home. And the minute Molly and Craig saw him they fell in love and roared crying when the cat was promptly escorted off the premises. So, speedily drawing a circle for his face, on top of a bigger circle for his body, Clodagh finished the quick portrait of Tiddles by doing his ears and whiskers. "Get me a red crayon," she ordered Molly. Molly duly returned, offering a blunt, yellow pencil and a Banana in Pyjamas. "Oh, I'll get it. If you want anything done properly, you have to do it yourself." Talking angrily to the air, Clodagh rummaged madly through the painting box and found the crayon, then— with no little satisfaction—gouged a big, red X through the cat. Surely Flor would understand that? Her last drawing done, Clodagh sighed heavily. She'd love a cleaning woman who could read. It had taken her weeks to find out that Flor was illiterate. In the beginning, she used to leave her all kinds of complicated notes, requesting Flor to do specific things like take the washing out of the washing machine when it finished its cycle, or defrost the freezer. Flor never complied, and although Clodagh used to lie awake at night fuming, she was too mortified to take her to task. Despite the problems, she didn't want to lose her. Cleaning women were like gold dust. Even the crap ones. Not to mention that Clodagh had no faith in her own ability to command respect in this situation. She had visions of herself trying to berate Flor in a voice that quavered with lack of conviction, "Now look here, my good woman, this simply won't do." In the end she forced Dylan to be late for work one morning to have it out with Flor. And, of course, she 'fessed up to Dylan, who was sympathy itself. Dylan had what they called Good People Skills. And, on Dylan's suggestion, they came to their current arrangement, where Clodagh drew her instructions to Flor. Between the guilt and the drawings, it almost seemed easier to do the housework herself. Almost, but not quite. Despite everything, Clodagh savored the one morning a week when the pressure was off her. Taking care of the house was like painting the Forth Bridge, only worse. She was never on top of things, and the minute something was done it needed to be done again. No sooner was the kitchen floor mopped—no, wait!—even while she was mopping it, they were skidding across it in their shoes, etching stripes of mud through her good work. And her linen basket seemed to be like the refillable pint of mythology. Even after she'd done three loads of washing and to her knowledge laundered

every item of clothing in the house, her warm glow of achievement disappeared the instant she went into her bedroom—for the linen basket that had been empty mere minutes previously would be mysteriously once more full to overflowing. At least she didn't have to worry about the garden. Not because it was nice. On the contrary, it was a muddy shambles, the grass flattened and sparse because of being overrun by children, and there was a great bald patch beneath the swing. But she was absolved from having to do anything about it until Molly and Craig were grown up. Just as well. She'd heard terrible horror stories about gardeners from hell. After several false starts—Molly wanted to wear her hat, Craig had to go back in and get his Buzz Lightyear—Clodagh hurriedly piled them all into the Nissan Micra. As soon as she put the key in the ignition, Molly screeched, "I have to go wee-wee." "But you've just gone." Clodagh's exasperation was heightened by the fear of running into Flor. "But I have to go again." Molly was only recently toilet-trained, and the novelty of her newfound skill hadn't worn off yet. "Come on, then." Roughly, Clodagh bundled Molly from her car seat and hustled her back into the house, turning off the alarm she'd only just set. As predicted, despite much contorting of her face and promises that "It's coming," Molly couldn't summon any wee-wee. Back they went to the car again and away they went. After she'd dropped Craig at school, Clodagh wasn't sure where to go. Usually on Mondays, she dumped Molly in playschool and took herself off to the gym for a couple of hours. But not today. Molly had been suspended for a week from playschool for biting another child, and the gym had no day care. Clodagh decided to go into town and go around the shops until it was safe to go home. The day was sunny and mother and daughter traipsed slowly up Grafton Street, stopping—at Molly's urging—to stroke a homeless boy's dog, admire a flower stall, and dance to a fiddle player. Passersby smiled indulgently at the beautiful Molly, cute and ludicrous in her pink, furry, deerstalker hat, attempting to do Riverdance. As they made their way up the street Clodagh was in a pocket of besottedness, her heart swollen and sore with love. Molly was so funny, with her little sergeant major's strut, marching along with her chest puffed out, wanting to befriend every child she encountered. It wasn't always easy being a mother, Clodagh admitted dreamily. But at times like this she didn't mind so much. The paper seller openly admired the short, shapely woman trailing a small girl in her wake. "Herald?" he offered hopefully. Clodagh looked at it with regret. "But what would be the point?" She elaborated. "I haven't had time to read a paper since 1996." "Not much profit in buying one so," the paperman agreed, appreciating the back view of Clodagh as she walked away from him. She knew he was watching her and it felt

surprisingly good. His bold, roguish stare stirred memories of when men used to look at her like that all the time. It felt like a very long time ago, almost as if it had happened to someone else. But what was she doing? Getting excited because a newspaper seller had given her the glad eye? You're married, she scolded herself. Yeah, she answered wryly, married alive. It took a contented hour and a half to reach the Stephen's Green Centre, and by then, according to the law of averages, Molly and Clodagh were due for a bust-up. Sure enough, when Clodagh wouldn't buy Molly a second ice cream, Molly promptly threw the mother of all tantrums. She behaved as though she were having an epileptic fit, thrashing about on the floor, banging her head on the tiles, screeching abuse. Clodagh tried to pull her up, but Molly wriggled like an octopus. "I hate you!" she screamed, and though Clodagh was a-shrivel with embarrassment, she forced herself to speak in a steady voice, assuring Molly that a second ice cream would give her a stomachache and promising that if she didn't get up and behave herself immediately, she'd be going to bed early every night for the next week. Scores of hard-faced mothers passed, laden with children, whom they cuffed and hit on an automatic rota. "Hey, Jason," Ddush! "Leave Tamara alone." Smackkk! "Zoe." Thump! "If I catch you hitting Brooklyn again I'll fucking kill you." Clouttt! With their scornful looks, the women derided Clodagh's liberal principles. Give that brat a good belt, their school of hard knocks' faces sneered. Going to bed early, my foot. Smack a bit of sense into her, it's the only language they understand. Clodagh and Dylan had made a decision never to hit their children. But when Molly started kicking her while continuing to screech, Clodagh found herself yanking the child off the floor and administering a smart smack to her bare leg. It seemed as if the whole of Dublin gasped. Suddenly all the slab-faced child beaters had melted away, and instead Clodagh was assailed by pair after pair of accusing eyes. Everyone around her looked like they worked for the child abuse hot line. A wave of crimson shame slapped her in the face. What was she doing, assaulting a defenseless little girl? What was wrong with her? "Come on." Hastily she tugged the roaring Molly away, appalled by the mark of her hand on Molly's tender leg. To atone for her guilt, Clodagh immediately bought Molly the ice cream that had prompted the tantrum in the first place, and expected peace for precisely the length of time it took Molly to eat it. Except the ice cream started to melt and Clodagh was asked to leave a fabric shop after Molly rubbed her cone carefully along a bolt of curtain muslin, patterning it with a thick white trail. The morning had soured, and wiping a Father Christmas beard of ice cream from Molly's chin, Clodagh couldn't help feeling that life seemed to have had more of a sparkle to it once, a kind of yellow glow. She'd always rushed forward to greet her future,

blithely confident that what it delivered would be good. And it hadn't ever let her down. Her requests of life had never been overly ambitious and she'd always gotten what she wanted. On paper everything was perfect—she had two healthy children, a good husband, no money worries. But lately everything felt like unrelenting drudgery. Had done for quite a while, actually. She tried to remember when it had started, and when she couldn't, fear squeezed perspiration through her pores. The thought of this mind-set crystallizing into anything like permanence was terrifying. By nature she was a happy, uncomplicated person—this she could see by comparing herself with poor Ashling, who tied herself in knots about almost everything. But something had changed. Not so long ago she was fueled by anticipation and optimism. What was different, what had gone wrong?

14

"Diet Lilt or Purdeys?" Ashling mused. "I don't know." "Well, make your mind up," Trix urged, her pen poised over her spiral-bound notebook. "The shop'll be closed if you don't hurry." Though the Colleen team had been working together less than two weeks, already they had a routine. A shop run was done twice a day, morning and afternoon. This was separate from the lunch run and the hangover-cure run. "Uh-oh," Trix observed. "Here's Heathcliff." Jack Devine strode into the office, all tumbled hair and troubled face. "I just can't make my mind up," Ashling lamented, agonizing between drinks. "Of course you can't," Jack said nastily, without breaking stride. "After all, you're a woman!" His office door slammed behind him and heads were shaken in sympathy. "The reunion lunch with Mai obviously wasn't," Kelvin observed, wagging a beringed finger. "What a tormented man." Shauna Griffin looked up from proofreading that autumn's Gaelic Knitting, her voice trembling. "So handsome, yet so unreachable, so unhappy." Shauna Griffin was a large, fair woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to the Honey Monster. She regularly exceeded the recommended dosage of Mills and Boons romances. "Unhappy?" Ashling asked scornfully. "JD? He's just bad-tempered." "That's the first bitchy thing I've ever heard you say about anyone," Trix exclaimed hoarsely. "Congratulations. I knew you had it in you! You see what you can achieve when you put your mind to it." "Diet Lilt," Ashling replied drolly. "And a bag of buttons." "White or brown?" "White." "Money." Ashling handed over a pound. Trix wrote it all down on her list and moved on to the next person. "Lisa?" Trix asked, adoringly. "Anything?" "Hmm?" Lisa jumped. She'd been far away. Jack had discovered that she hadn't found anywhere to live yet, so after work he was taking her to see a house that a friend of his wanted to let. She'd been worried that he would get back with Mai

over their lunch, but it looked as if her path was clear... “Cigs?” Trix urged. “Sugar-free gum?” “Yeah. Cigs.” The door opened again and Jack emerged, looking faintly distraught. Trix hopped nimbly back to her desk, and with a practiced flick of the wrist opened her drawer, threw her cigarettes in, and slammed it shut. Jack roamed among the desks and no one would meet his look. Those who could inched and hid their cigarettes behind something. Lisa had a box of Silk Cut open beside her mouse pad, but though Jack wavered and seemed like he might stop, he sped up again and passed by. Everyone flinched. Then he got to Ashling and halted, and the office exhaled silently. Safe, for a while. Against her will, Ashling’s face was pulled up to look at him. Silently he tilted his head at her box of Marlboros. She nodded warily, hating her compliance. He was so unpleasant to her, but she seemed to be the only one he cadged cigarettes from. She obviously had “gobshite” stamped on her forehead. His eyes coolly watching her, he fastened his lips around the filter and, as usual, slowly, smoothly slid the cigarette from its box. Jerkily, she passed him her box of matches, taking care not to touch him. Without moving his eyes from hers, he struck a match, held the flame against the tip, then shook it out. Inclining the cigarette upward, he pulled deep. “Thanks,” he murmured. “When are you going to start buying smokes again?” Trix demanded, now that her own were briefly safe. “You obviously can’t give them up. And it’s not fair; you must earn millions more than Ashling, but you’ve been bumming loads of cigarettes off her.” “Have I?” He looked startled. “Have I?” He turned his gaze onto Ashling and she seemed to wither away from him in her seat. “Sorry, I hadn’t noticed.” “ ’S okay,” she mumbled. Jack disappeared back into his office and Kelvin observed dryly, “Betcha he’s inside there kicking himself for exploiting the workers by nicking their smokes. Jack Devine, Working-Class Hero.” “Wanna-be Working-Class Hero, more like,” Trix scorned. “How so?” Ashling couldn’t hide her curiosity. “He’d love to be a humble craftsman, and do an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay.” Trix’s contempt for such modest aspirations was almost tangible. “Problem is,” Kelvin expounded, “he was born middle-class and burdened with all kinds of advantages. Like an education. Then he gets an M.A. in communications. Next”—he lowered his voice ominously—“he begins to display excellent managerial skills.”

“Fair broke his heart.” Trix sighed. “I reckon he’s riddled with middle-class guilt. That’s why he’s always offering to fix things. And why he has all those macho hobbies.” “Which macho hobbies?” “Well, he goes sailing, that’s macho,” Trix offered. “And riding sexy half-Vietnamese women,” Kelvin added, “that’s very macho, too.” Ashling sidled

tentatively up to Lisa. "Can I ask you something?" "No, thank you," Lisa sang, not even looking up from her desk. "I don't want to come for a drink with you and Trix or your friend Joy or anyone else this evening. Or any evening." Everyone sniggered, to Lisa's gratification. "I wasn't going to ask you that." A blush crawled up Ashling's neck. She'd only been trying to be nice to a stranger in Dublin, but Lisa made it sound like she fancied her. "It's a work-related question. Why don't we have a problem page with a difference?" "What's the difference, Einstein?" "We get a psychic to do the answers, instead of a counselor." Lisa was thoughtful. Not a bad idea. Very zeitgeisty, what with everyone on the hunt for a spiritual element to fix their lives. She believed none of it herself—taking the line that her happiness was very much in her own hands—but that was no reason not to peddle it to the masses. "Maybe." Relief soothed the sting of Lisa's innuendo. In the short time Ashling had been working at Colleen, constant anxiety about her lack of ideas had gnawed at her. Then Ted suggested that she think about what she'd like from a magazine and suddenly avenues opened up. Anything to do with tarot, Reiki, feng shui, affirmations, angels, white witches, and spells piqued her interest.

Jack's door opened again and everyone flung themselves protectively on their cigarettes. "Lisa?" Jack called. "Can I have a word?" "Certainly." Elegantly she got up from her desk, wondering what he wanted to talk to her about. Could it be that he was going to ask her out? When he instructed her to shut the door her excitement mounted. And instantly disappeared when he said apologetically, "There's no easy way of saying this." He paused, his handsome face shuttered by discomfort. Lisa said coolly, "Go on." "We're not making the advertising," he said, baldly. "Nobody's biting. We're only up to"—he checked the memo on his desk—"twelve percent of what we'd projected." Lisa twitched with fear. This had never happened before. Though they'd always negotiated off rate card, designers and cosmetic companies had been falling over themselves to take out full-page ads when she'd been editor of *Femme*. And as everyone in magazines knows, the income generated from selling ads is far in excess than that garnered from cover price sales. At least it should be. If companies can't be persuaded that a particular publication is the right vehicle in which to advertise their product, it goes under. Panic swept up Lisa in a prickly wave. How would she ever live down the failure of a stillborn magazine? "It's early days," she tried. Reluctantly he had to shake his head. It wasn't; they both knew that. Colleen had been in preproduction for over a month and advertisers had had plenty of time to bite. Lisa burned with humiliation. She wanted this man to



respect and desire her and instead he was bound to think she was a failure. "But don't they know . . . ?" she couldn't stop herself from blurting. "Know what?" She tried to reformulate and couldn't. "Know that I'm the editor?" "Your name carries a lot of weight," Jack said, tactfully, and when she saw how unpleasant he, too, was finding this, it soothed the sting. "But new marketplace, new audience, no track record..." "I thought you said that Margie was a rottweiler. That she could persuade God to place an ad." When in doubt, blame someone else. A motto that had served Lisa well thus far in her career. "Margie's great at getting ads from Irish companies," Jack explained. "But the London office is handling the international cosmetic and fashion houses. "Where are we at?" Jack asked. "What kind of definite features have we? We need to throw a couple of bones to the London office for them to show the potential ad placers." Lisa's face was a white mask as she searched around in her head. Definite features! She'd been in this fucking job less than two weeks, thrown in at the deep end, in a strange country. She'd been knocking herself out trying to get a handle on things, and already they wanted to know definite features! "Just a rough idea," Jack said, with heartbreaking gentleness. "Sorry to do this to you." "Why don't we all go to the boardroom for a progress meeting," Lisa suggested, a wobbliness about her knees. And to think that everyone thought editing a magazine was glamorous. It was the most terrifying, sleepless-night-inducing job, with no certainty, no respite. Just trying to make the figures every month. And as soon as you'd strained and sweated yourself to the limit to do so, you had to turn around and start all over again. All you were was a glorified salesman. In an attempt at dynamism, she swept from Jack's office, but her leg muscles were pulpy and useless and she had a sheen of perspiration above her lip. "Boardroom, everyone, now!" All the people who didn't work on Colleen sniggered, delighted that they weren't being bollocked. "Right, then." Lisa played for time by giving a terrifying smile around the boardroom table. "Perhaps you'd all like to tell Jack and me what you've been doing for the past two weeks. Ashling?" "I've sent out press releases to all the fashion houses and—" "Press releases?" Lisa asked, sarcastically. "Is there no beginning to your talents?" Dutiful sniggers issued from Trix, Gerry, and Bernard. "So punters are going to pay two pounds fifty to read Colleen's press releases? Features, Ashling, I'm talking features! What have you?" Bewildered by her aggression, Ashling gave her salsa report. As she described the lesson, the teacher, and the other pupils, Lisa relaxed slightly. This was good. Encouraged by Lisa's nodding, Ashling enthused about the club that had been on after the lesson. "It was great. Proper old-fashioned dancing with lots of body contact. "It was actually very—" For some

reason she hesitated over using the word with Jack Devine in the room. He made her so uncomfortable. "Very sexy." "And the romance factor?" Lisa asked, cutting to the chase. "Did you meet any blokes?" Ashling squirmed. "I, um, had a dance with a man," she admitted. As everyone squealed and fell over themselves to get details, Jack Devine watched her through half-closed eyes. "It was only a dance," Ashling protested. "He didn't even ask me my name." "You got photos of the club," Lisa said. It wasn't a question. At Ashling's nod, she went on. "We'll do a four-page spread on it. Two thousand words, ASAP. Make it entertaining." Clammy dread flushed down Ashling and she would have given anything to still be working at Woman's Place. She couldn't write. Toiling hard at the boring stuff was her forte, she was really, really marvelous at it, and that had been the basis Colleen had hired her on. Couldn't Mercedes write it, or one of the freelancers? "Problem?" Lisa twisted her mouth sarcastically. "No," Ashling whispered. But her guts seized in fear as she realized she was in over her head. Joy would have to help her. Or perhaps Ted—he had to draft lots of reports for his job in the Department of Agriculture. Next on the agenda was Trix's column on an ordinary girl's life. The first one was on the perils of two-timing. Of what a pain it was to be in bed with one boyfriend and for another to knock on the door and for your mother to let him in. It was funny, outrageous, and entirely true. "Good Lord, Patricia Quinn." Jack shook his head in amusement. "I've been living a very sheltered life." "I wouldn't recommend it," Trix exclaimed. "Him and me ma in the lounge watching Heartbeat, and me trapped in the bedroom with the other one, making excuses not to leave. I aged ten years." "And that'd make you what? Twenty-five?" Jack's eyes were crinkled with laughter. Ashling looked at him in a type of sour wonder. Why is he always so horrible to me? Why isn't he ever amused by me? Just as she realized that perhaps she simply wasn't amusing, she caught sight of Lisa's face. A lambent determination and hard admiration. She fancies him, Ashling realized, and her stomach flip-flopped. If anyone could lure Jack Devine away from the exotic Mai, Lisa could. What must it be like to have that kind of power?

Then Lisa outlined a "fun" feature that she'd thought of that very minute. A review of the sexiest hotel beds in Ireland. Graded according to crispness of bed linen, firmness of mattress, size of bonking space, and "the handcuff factor"—wrought-iron headboards or the limbs of four-poster canopies were ideal. "God, whatever they're paying you, you're worth it." Trix overflowed with admiration. "Mercedes?" Lisa challenged. "We're going to Donegal on Friday to shoot an exclusive of Frieda Kiely's winter collection," Mercedes said

smugly. "We should get a twelve-page spread from it." Frieda Kiely was an Irish designer who sold very well abroad. She made wild, gorgeous confections of rough Irish tweed matched with featherlight chiffon; sheeny Ulster linen married with squares of crocheted silk; knitted sleeves that reached the floor. The whole effect was romantic and untamed. A bit too untamed for Lisa, actually. If you were paying those kind of prices—not that she ever would, of course—she'd prefer the sleek tailoring of Gucci. "How about an interview with her?" Lisa suggested. Mercedes laughed. "Oh no, she's bonkers. You wouldn't get a word of sense from her." "Exactly," Lisa barked. "It would make for interesting reading." "You don't know what she's like..." "We're showcasing her winter collection, the least she can do is tell us what she has for breakfast." "But—" "Impress me." Lisa glinted, in a parody of Calvin Carter. Which might have amused Mercedes had she known what Lisa was doing. But she didn't, so her only option was to flash Lisa an intensely sour glare. Jack turned his attention to Gerry. "How are we getting on with the cover?" Lisa watched anxiously. Gerry was so quiet that she paid him no attention and consequently she hadn't a clue if he was any good at his job. But Gerry whipped out several cover prototypes—three different girls overlain with a selection of typefaces and text. The mood he'd created was remarkably sexy and fun. "Excellent," Jack enthused. Then he turned to Lisa. "And how are we getting on with the celebrity column?" "Working on it." Lisa smiled smoothly. Bono and the Corrs were refusing to return her calls. "But more interestingly, even though we're a women's magazine and our audience will be ninety-five percent women, I think there's a real case for having a column by a man in Colleen." Just a minute, Ashling thought, her brain bruising with shock, that was my idea ... Her mouth worked, making silent "Oh"s and "Ah"s, as Lisa continued blithely, "There's a stand-up comedian that my sources tell me is about to go stellar. Thing is he won't do anything for a women's magazine, but I'm going to convince him otherwise." You bitch, Ashling thought. You fucking, fucking bitch. And didn't anyone else remember? Hadn't anyone else noticed...? "I . . ." Ashling managed. "What?" Lisa shot, her golden face terrifying, her gray eyes as hard and cold as marbles. Ashling, never the best at standing up for herself, mumbled, "Nothing." "It'll be a great coup." Lisa smiled at Jack. "Who is he?" "Marcus Valentine." "Are you serious?" Jack was genuinely animated. "Wh-who?" Ashling asked, shock heaped upon shock. "Marcus Valentine," Lisa said impatiently. "Have you heard of him?" Ashling nodded mutely. That freckly bloke hadn't looked like a man about to "go stellar." Lisa must be mistaken. But she seemed so sure of her facts... "He's on on Saturday night in a place called the River Club," Lisa said. "You and I will go, Ashling." "The River Club?"

Ashling had gone nearly as hoarse as Trix. "Saturday night?" "Yesss." Lisa writhed in impatience. "My friend Ted is on, too," Ashling heard herself say. Lisa narrowed her eyes appraisingly. "Oh yeah? Great. We can get a backstage introduction." "Good job I haven't any plans for Saturday night," Ashling heard spilling from her normally meek mouth. "That's right," Lisa agreed, coolly. "Good job." As everyone filed out of the boardroom, Lisa turned to Jack. "Happy?" she challenged. "You're amazing," he said, with simple sincerity. "Quite amazing. Thank you. I'll talk to them in London." "How soon will we know?" "Probably not until next week. Don't worry, you've come up with some great ideas, I suspect it'll be fine. Six o'clock okay with you to go and see the house?" Raw and raging with injustice, Ashling returned to her desk. She was never going to be nice to that bitch again. To think she'd felt sorry for her, friendless in an unfamiliar country. She'd tried to forgive Lisa her constant bitchy put-downs on the basis that she must be unhappy and frightened. Sometimes, to Ashling's shame, she'd even half laughed when Lisa had implied that Dervla was fat, Mercedes hairy, Shauna Griffin inbred, herself pathetically clingy. But now Lisa Edwards could die of loneliness for all she, Ashling Kennedy, cared. Slapped on her George Clooney screen saver was a yellow Post-it, saying that "Dillon" had rung. She peeled it off, the screen crackling with static. Surely it wasn't October already? Dylan rang Ashling twice a year. In October and December. To ask what he should get Clodagh for her birthday and for Christmas. She rang him back. "Hi, Ashling. Time for a quick drink tomorrow after work?" "Can't. I've got a horrible article to write—maybe later in the week, okay? Why, what's up?" "Nothing. Maybe. I'll be away at a conference, I'll give you a shout when I get back." 15 "Ready, Lisa?" Jack asked, appearing at her desk at ten past six. Watched silently by their gossip-hungry colleagues, they left the office and got the lift down to the car park. The second they were in the car, Jack ripped his tie from his neck and flung it into the backseat. Then tore open the first two buttons on his shirt. "That's better." He sighed. "And go for it yourself," he invited. "Take off whatever you want." He broke off the end of the sentence abruptly and a mortified hiatus followed. The heat of his discomfort reached Lisa. "Sorry," he muttered grimly. "That came out wrong." Agitatedly he ran his hand through his messy hair, so that the front stood up in silky peaks before flopping back down onto his forehead.

"No problem." Lisa smiled politely, but the tiny downy hairs on the nape of her neck rose sharply. Shocked and excited at the image of undressing for Jack in his car, she felt those dark eyes on her naked body, the cool of the leather seats against the heat of her skin. Nipping

her lip in determination, she vowed to make it happen. After a suitable recovery period Jack spoke again. "Let me tell you about the house." He steered into the Dublin evening traffic. "The deal is, Brendan is going to work in the States. He's got an eighteen-month contract, which might be extended, but it would mean that you'd have the place for a year and a half, anyway. After that we'd have to see." Lisa shifted noncommittally. It didn't matter because she didn't intend to be here in a year and a half's time. "It's off the South Circular Road, which is very central," Jack promised. "It's an area of Dublin that still has a lot of character. It hasn't been yuppified to fuck." Lisa's spirits started a slow slither. She was desperate to live in a place that had been yuppified to fuck. "There's a strong sense of community. Lots of families live here." Lisa wanted nothing to do with families. She wanted to be surrounded by other singles and to bump into attractive men at her local Tesco Metro buying kettle chips and Chardonnay. Dully, she watched his hands on the steering wheel, her churning misery calmed by the confidence with which they glanced off and guided the leather. He swung the car off the main road onto a smaller road, then onto an even smaller one. "There it is." He pointed through the windshield. Crouching on the pavement was a little redbrick artisan's cottage. Lisa took one look and hated it. She liked modern and fresh, airy and spacious. This house promised cramped, dark rooms, ancient plumbing, and an unhygienic freestanding kitchen with a horrid Belfast sink. Reluctantly she got out of the car. Jack approached the house, put the key in the lock, pushed the door, and stood back to let Lisa pass. He had to duck his head to fit through the doorway. "Wooden floors," she remarked, looking around. "Brendan had them done a couple of months ago," Jack said proudly. She forbore from enlightening him that those in the know were completely over wooden floors and that carpets were very much in the driver's seat. "Sitting room." Jack led her into a small, ash-floored room containing a red couch, a telly, and a cast-iron fireplace. "That's an original." Jack nodded at it. "Mmmmm." Lisa loathed cast-iron fireplaces—they were so busy. "Kitchen." Jack trailed her through to the next room. "Fridge, microwave, washing machine." Lisa looked around. At least the cupboards were fitted and the sink was an ordinary aluminum one—she'd rather run the risk of Alzheimer's than live with a Belfast sink. But her satisfaction ebbed when she noticed a scrubbed pine kitchen table, with four sturdy, rustic chairs! Heartsore, she thought of the wheely turquoise Formica table and four woven-wire chairs in her kitchen in Ladbroke Grove. "He said something about the boiler playing up. I'll just take a quick look." Half disappearing into a cupboard, Jack rolled up his sleeves, displaying brown forearms, with planes of muscles that shifted with the

movements of his hands. "Pass me the wrench from that drawer there, will you?" Jack indicated with his head. Lisa wondered if he was putting on a special macho display in her honor, then she remembered Trix saying he was handy with machinery, and felt her sap rising. She'd always had a weakness for men who were good with their hands, who got smeared in oil and came home at the end of a hard day's fixing things, slowly unzipped their overalls, and said meaningfully, "I bin thinkin' 'bout ya all day, baby." She also had a weakness for men with six-figure salaries and the power to promote her when she didn't really deserve it. How nice would it be to combine the two? Jack banged and twiddled with things for a short time longer before saying, "It looks like the timer is gone. You can get hot water, but you can't preset it. I'll sort it out for you. Let's see the bathroom." To her surprise the bathroom passed the test. Washing herself needn't necessarily be a lightning raid, with a loofah in one hand and a stopwatch in the other. "Nice bath," she admitted. "Handy little shelf there beside it," Jack agreed. "Just big enough for two glasses of wine and a scented candle." Lisa's swift glance was meaningful. And wasted. To her frustration Jack had marched onward to the next room. "Bedroom," he announced. It was bigger and brighter than the other rooms, though it was still afflicted with a country-cottage feel. Sprigging on the white curtains, echoed by sprigging on the duvet cover, and way too much pine. Pine headboard, big pine wardrobe, pine chest of drawers. Even the mattress is probably made of pine, Lisa thought scornfully. "It overlooks the garden." Jack pointed out the window at a smallish square of grass, bordered by shrubs and blooms. Lisa's heart sank. She'd never had a garden before and she didn't want one. She liked flowers as much as the next woman, but only when they came in a big cellophane bouquet, with an enormous satin ribbon and a card of congratulation. She'd rather die than take up gardening; the accessories were gruesome—elastic-waisted trousers, ridiculous floppy hats, silly baskets, and mad Michael Jackson gloves. It was Not a Good Look. And though she'd told Femme readers last July that gardening was the new sex, she hadn't meant a word of it. Sex was sex. Perennially. She missed it. "He said something about having a herb garden," Jack said. "Shall we check it out?" He shot the bolt on the back door, and again had to duck his head on the way out. She followed his straight-backed progress across the little lawn, wryly amused by her own admiration. The birds chattered in the benign evening light, the air was pungent with grass and earth, and for a second she didn't hate everything. "Over here." He waved her toward a bed and folded his long legs into a crouch. To show willingness, Lisa halfheartedly hunkered beside him. "Mind your suit." He extended his

arm protectively. "Don't get muck on it." "What about yours?" "I couldn't give a fuck about mine." He turned and gave her an unexpectedly mischievous smile. Up close she saw he had a tiny chip on one of his front teeth. It added to his maverick air. "If I get enough grass stains on it, it'll have to go to the cleaners and I won't be able to wear it tomorrow. And wouldn't that be terrible?" he asked dryly. Lisa laughed and, just for the hell of it, moved her head closer to his. She watched his pupils narrow and dilate through several expressions—confusion to interest to extreme interest back to confusion and then blankness. It took far less than a second. Then he turned away and asked, "Is that coriander or parsley?" One of his locks of hair was winding around itself into a curl. Lisa wanted to put her finger in and spring it. "What do you think?" he asked her again. Feeling as if they were speaking in code, she looked at the leaf in his hand. "I don't know." Between his thumb and forefinger, he crumbled the leaf, then held it to her face. Intimately close. "Smell," he instructed. Her eyes closed, she inhaled, trying to breathe in his skin. "Coriander," she said in triumph. She was rewarded with another smile from him. His mouth went kind of curly at the corners... "And there's basil, chives, and thyme," he indicated. "You can use them for cooking." "Yeah." She smiled. "I can sprinkle them on my takeaways." There was no point pretending to him. The days of being bonkers-besotted and wanting to cook for her beloved were long gone. "You don't cook?" She shook her head. "I don't have time." "That's what I keep hearing," he said. "Does, er, Mai cook?" Big mistake. Jack's face went back to being closed and broody. "No," he said shortly. "At least not for me," he added. "Come on, let's go. "So what do you think of the house?" he asked, once they were back inside. "I like it," Lisa lied. It was the best place she'd seen, but that wasn't saying much. "It's got a lot of things going for it," Jack agreed. "The rent is decent, the area is nice, and you can walk to work." "That's right," Lisa said, with a darkness that puzzled him. "You can move in here right away," Jack offered. He stood up and began the awkward jingling of change in his pockets that Lisa recognized of old. It was what men did as they tried to pluck up the courage to ask her out for a drink. She could see the struggle in his eyes and his body was coiled as if he was about to launch into something. Get on with it, she urged silently. Then his eyes cleared and all tension seemed to fall away. "I'll drop you back to your hotel now," he said. Lisa understood. She sensed that he was attracted to her and she also sensed his reservations. Not only did they work together, but he was involved with someone else. No matter. She'd work her mojo on him and overcome his objections. She'd enjoy it—making Jack fall for her would take her mind off all her grief. "Thank you for finding me somewhere to live." She smiled sweetly at Jack.

"It's a pleasure," Jack replied. "And don't hesitate to ask for whatever you need. I'll do everything I can to make your move to Ireland easier." "Thanks." She flicked him another flirty little smile. "You're far too busy and too important to Colleen to waste your time viewing flats." Oh. Curled on a chair, Lisa lit a fag and stared out the hotel window onto Harcourt Street. She was bothered by mild guilt. So mild it was barely there, but the fact that it existed at all was worthy of comment. It was that bloody Ashling. She'd been so pathetically surprised when Lisa had nicked her idea. Well, tough, that's the way it goes. That's why Lisa was an editor and Ashling a dogsbody. And Lisa had been terrified, absolutely craven, when Jack had told her the advertising situation. Fear always made her treacherous and ruthless. At the moment the initial bowel-clenching terror had somewhat abated. Her brand of pushy optimism meant she was encapsulated in a bubble of hope where it seemed reasonably possible to generate all the advertising that was needed. Nevertheless the fact was that Lisa's ass was the one on the line. If the magazine bombed, Ashling's life wasn't over and Lisa's was, simple as that. Okay, everyone thought she was a bitch, but they had no conception of the pressure she was under. With a long sigh, Lisa exhaled a plume of smoke—the memory of Ashling's shocked face needled her, made her feel mildly shitty. She'd always been able to control her emotions before. It had been easy to subjugate them to the greater good, that of the job. She'd better regain her grip. 16 Daily, invitations to press launches arrived in the post—everything from new lines in eye shadow to openings of shops—and Lisa and Mercedes ruthlessly shared them out between them. Lisa, as editor, got first refusal. But Mercedes, as fashion and beauty editor, had to be allowed to go to a good few, too. Ashling, Cinderella-like, stayed behind to mind the shop and Trix was way too far down the feeding chain to ever stand a chance of going. "What happens at a publicity do?" Trix asked Lisa. "You stand around with a bunch of other journalists and a few celebrities," Lisa said. "You talk to anyone important, you listen to the presentation." "Tell me about this one you're going to today." A shop called Morocco was opening its first Irish branch. Lisa couldn't have cared less—it had been open for years in London—but the Irish franchise holder was treating it as a big deal. The famous-for-being-famous Tara Palmer Tompkinson was flying over from London for the launch, which was being held in the Royalton-inspired splendor of the Fitzwilliam Hotel. "Will they have food?" Trix asked. "There's usually something. Canapés. Champagne." In fact, Lisa dearly hoped there would be food because she'd started a new eating plan—instead of the Seven Dwarfs Diet she'd moved on to the Publicity Diet. She could eat and drink what she liked, but only at publicity events. Lisa knew the importance of being thin, but she



refused to be a traditional diet slave. Instead she incorporated unusual limitations and rewards into her relationship with food, always keeping the challenge fresh and interesting. "Champagne!" Excitement made Trix Don-Corleone-hoarse. "That's if they're not a low-rent outfit, and if they are they don't get a plug in the mag. Then you get your goody bag and leave." "A goody bag!" Trix lit up at the mention of something free. Something that she didn't have to go to the trouble of stealing. "What kind of goody bag?" "Depends." Lisa pouted jadedly. "With a cosmetics company you usually get a selection of this season's makeup." Trix squeaked with delight. "With a shop like this, perhaps a bag—" "A bag!" She hadn't had a free bag in years, not since they'd started electronically tagging them. "Or a top." "Oh my God," Trix jiggled in excitement. "You're so lucky!" After a long, thoughtful pause, Trix suggested overinnocently, "You know, you should really take Ashling along with you." The pecking order was such that there was no chance Trix would ever be allowed to go until Ashling was. "She's your assistant editor. She should know what the drill is if you ever get sick." "But . . ." Mercedes's smooth olive face was anxious at the suggestion of someone else muscling in on such sacred ground. There were only so many free lipsticks to go around. Mercedes's palpable anxiety coupled with the residue of guilt around Ashling made Lisa's decision easy. "Good idea, Trix. Okay, Ashling, you can ride shotgun with me this afternoon. That is," she added disingenuously, "if you'd like to come." Ashling had always been bad at holding a grudge. Especially when there was free stuff involved. "Would I like to come?" She disappointed herself by exclaiming, "I'd love to come." Lisa had lunch at the Clarence with a bestselling author whom she was trying to persuade to write a regular column. It was a success. Not only did the woman agree to do the column for a knockdown fee in exchange for regular plugs for her books, but Lisa escaped the lunch almost unscathed. Despite swirling her food energetically around her plate, all she ate was half a cherry tomato and a forkful of corn-fed chicken. She returned to work triumphant and was trawling through her mail when Ashling showed up beside her desk, with her bag and coat. "Lisa," Ashling said anxiously. "It's two thirty and the invite is for three. Should we go?" Lisa laughed in sardonic surprise. "Rule number one—never be on time. Everyone knows that! You're too important." "Am I?" "Pretend." Lisa returned to her pile of press releases. But after a while she found herself looking up and saw that Ashling's avid eyes were fastened onto her. "For crying out loud," Lisa exclaimed, bitterly regretting ever inviting Ashling. "Sorry. I'm just afraid everything will be gone." "What everything?" "The canapés, the goody bags." "I'm not leaving until three, and don't ask me again." At three-fifteen, Lisa reached under

her desk for her Miu Miu tote and said to a quivering Ashling, "Come on, then!" The taxi journey through the traffic-thronged streets took so long that even Lisa began to worry that all the canapés and goody bags would be gone. "What now?" she demanded irritably as a policeman thrust his meaty paw at them, indicating that they should stop. "Ducks," the driver said shortly. As Lisa wondered if "ducks" was a Dublin swearword along the lines of "feck," Ashling exclaimed, "Oh, look, ducks!" You what! Lisa wondered, then before her startled eyes a mother duck strutted across the road, trailing six ducklings in a line behind her. Two policemen were holding up both directions of traffic to guarantee a safe passage to the duck family. She could hardly believe it! "Happens every year." Ashling's eyes were alight. "The ducks hatch on the canal, then when they're big enough, they come down to the lake on Stephen's Green." "Hundreds of them. Shags up the traffic entirely. Annoy the shite outta you," the taxi driver said fondly. This fucking city . . . Lisa sighed. As Lisa and Ashling alighted outside the Fitzwilliam Hotel, the day was chilly and blustery, the mini-heat wave of the previous week but a distant memory. One leg wax doesn't make a summer, Ashling thought sadly, back to wearing trousers again after a long summer skirt had enjoyed a too-brief airing the day before. Then she forgot the weather and ecstatically elbowed Lisa. "Look! It's your woman, what's-her-name? Tara Palmtree Yokiemedoodle." And indeed it was Tara Palmtree Yokiemedoodle, parading up and down on the pavement outside the hotel, surrounded by a throng of frantically clicking photographers. "Givvus a bit of leg there, good girl, Tara," they urged. Ashling headed for the road, to walk around the ring of photographers, but Lisa marched determinedly into the thick of them. "Oi, who's she?" Ashling heard. Then Lisa gushed, "Taaaaraaaaaa, darling, long time no see," wrestled Tara into a reluctant air snog, then swiveled them both to face the cameras. The photographers froze from their incessant clicking, then took in the golden, caramel-haired woman, cheek to cheek with Tara, and commenced their clicking with renewed fervor. "Lisa Edwards, editor in chief, Colleen magazine." Lisa moved among the photographers, informing them. "Lisa Edwards. Lisa Edwards. I'm an old friend of Tara's." "How do you know Tara Palmtree?" Ashling asked, in awe, when Lisa returned to her on the sidelines, where she'd been completely ignored by the photographers. "I don't." Lisa surprised her with a grin. "But rule number two—never let the truth stand in the way of a good story." Lisa swept into the hotel, Ashling trotting behind her. Two handsome young men came forward, greeted them, and relieved Ashling of her jacket. But Lisa airily refused to relinquish hers. "May I remind you of rule number three," Lisa muttered tetchily, en route to the reception room. "We never leave

our jacket. You want to give the impression that you're very busy, just popping in for a few minutes, that you've a far more interesting life going on out there." "Sorry," Ashling said humbly. "I didn't realize." Into the party room, where a see-through-skinny woman dressed head to toe in Morocco's summer collection established who they were and made them sign a visitors' book. Lisa scribbled a perfunctory few words, then handed the pen to Ashling, who beamed with delight. "Me, too?" she squeaked. Lisa pursed her lips and shook her head in warning. Calm down! "Sorry," Ashling whispered, but couldn't help taking great care as she wrote neatly, "Ashling Kennedy, Assistant Editor, Colleen magazine." Lisa ran a French-manicured nail down the list of names. "Rule number four, as you know," she advised. "Look at the book. See who's here." "So we know who to meet." Ashling understood. Lisa looked at her as if she were mad. "No! So we know who to avoid!" "And who should we avoid?" With contempt, Lisa surveyed the room, full of liggers from rival magazines. "Just about everyone." But Ashling should know all this—and it had just become clear to Lisa that she hadn't even a grasp of the basics. In high alarm, she whispered, "Don't tell me you've never been to a publicity bash before? What about when you were with Woman's Place?" "We didn't get many invites," Ashling apologized. "Certainly nothing as glamorous as this. I suppose our readership was too old. And when we did get invited to the launch of a new colostomy bag or sheltered housing project or whatever, Sally Healy was nearly always the one who got to go." What Ashling didn't add was that Sally Healy was a round, mumsy type, who was friendly to everyone. She had none of Lisa's hard, lacquered rivalry or strange, aggressive rules.

"See him over there." Awestruck Ashling indicated a tall, Ken-doll type man. "He's Marty Hunter, a television presenter." "Déjà vu," Lisa snorted. "He was at the Bailey's bash yesterday and the Max Mara one on Monday." This plunged Ashling into a distressed silence. She'd had high hopes for this do. She'd wanted to shepherd and mind Lisa and prove to her that she needed her. And she'd anticipated that she'd win some much-coveted respect from Lisa by her indispensable insider knowledge of famous Irish people—knowledge that Lisa, as an Englishwoman, couldn't possibly hope to possess. But Lisa was miles ahead of her, already had a handle on the celebrity situation, and seemed irritated by Ash-ling's amateurish attempts to help. A roaming waitress stopped and thrust a tray at them. The food was Moroccan-themed: couscous, merguez sausages, lamb canapés. The drink, surprisingly, was vodka. Not very Moroccan, but Lisa didn't care. She ate what she could, but couldn't go berserk, because she was constantly talking to people, Ashling trailing in her wake.

Energetically, charmingly, Lisa worked the room like a pro—although it delivered few surprises. “Same old, same old.” She sighed. “Most of these sad losers would show up at the opening of a can of beans. Which brings me smoothly to rule five: use the fact that you still have your jacket as an excuse to escape. When someone becomes that soupçon too boring, you can say you have to go to the cloakroom.” Wandering around the room were a few doe-eyed models, their unformed, unripe bodies dressed by Morocco. Now and again a PR girl shunted one of them in front of Ashling and Lisa, who were expected to ooh and aah about the clothes. Ashling, hot with embarrassment, did her best, but Lisa barely looked. “It could be worse,” she confided, after another adolescent jerked and twisted in front of them, then departed. “At least it’s not swimwear. That happened at a sit-down dinner in London—trying to eat my meal while six girls stuck their bums and boobs into my plate. Ugh.” Then she told Ashling what she was beginning to realize anyway, “Rule number—what are we up to now? six?—there’s no such thing as a free anything. Come to something like this and you have to endure the hard sell. Oh no, there’s that creepy bloke from the Sunday Times. Let’s move over here.” Ashling became more and more diminished by Lisa’s encyclopedic knowledge of almost everyone in the room. She’d been living in Ireland less than two weeks and already it seemed she’d bonded with—and dismissed—most of the Who’s Who. With her stapled-on smile securely in place, Lisa swiveled discreetly on her Jimmy Choo heel. Had she missed anyone? Then she spotted a pretty young man, squirming uncomfortably in a too-new-looking suit. “Who’s he?” she asked, but Ashling had no idea. “Let’s find out, shall we?” “How?” “By asking him.” Lisa seemed amused at Ashling’s shock. Assuming a wide smile and twinkling eyes, Lisa descended on the boy, Ashling tagging behind. Up close he had spots on his youthful chin. “Lisa Edwards, Colleen magazine.” She extended her smooth, tanned hand. “Shane Dockery.” He ran a miserable finger under his tight shirt collar. “From Laddz,” Lisa finished for him. “Have you heard of us?” he exclaimed. No one else at this bash had a clue who he was. “ ’Course.” Lisa had seen a tiny mention of them in one of the Sunday papers and had jotted down their names, along with any other names that she thought she should know. “You’re the new boy band. Going to be bigger than ’N Sync ever were.” “Thanks,” he gulped, with the enthusiasm of the as-yet-unestablished. Perhaps it had been worth getting togged out in these terrible clothes after all. As they moved away, Lisa murmured, “See? Just remember, they’re more frightened of you than you are of them.” Ashling nodded thoughtfully and Lisa commended herself on her kind patronage. Helped, probably, by the copious quantities of vodka she was knocking back. Speaking of

which...? Instantly a waitress appeared at her side. "Vodka is the new water." Lisa raised her glass to Ashling. When Lisa had eaten and drunk her fill, it was time to leave. "Bye." Lisa wafted past the stick insect on the door. "Thank you." Ashling smiled. "The clothes were lovely and I'm sure Colleen readers will love them-mmm!" Ashling's sentence ended in a gasp as someone pinched her arm very, very hard. Lisa. "Thank you for coming." Stick Insect pressed a plastic-wrapped parcel into Lisa's hands. "And please accept this little goodwill gesture." "Oh, thanks," Lisa said vaguely, trailing away. Then one was pressed into Ashling's eager hands. Her face aglow, she dug her nail into the plastic to tear it open. Then gasped anew as someone pinched her arm again. "Oh, er, yeh, like, thanks." She tried and failed to sound casual. "Don't touch it," Lisa muttered as they strolled across the lobby to collect Ashling's jacket. "Don't even look at it. And never, ever tell a PR girl that you'll give them coverage. Play hard to get!" "Rule number seven, I suppose," Ashling said sulkily. "That's right." After they'd left the hotel, Ashling flicked Lisa an inquiring look, then glanced at her present. "Not yet!" Lisa insisted. "When, then?" "When we get around the corner. But no hurrying!" Lisa upbraided as Ashling almost started to run. The minute they were around the corner, Lisa said, "Now!" And they both tore the plastic off their parcels. It was a T-shirt, with morocco emblazoned across the front. "A T-shirt!" Lisa spat in disgust. "I think it's beautiful," Ashling said. "What will you do with yours?" "Bring it back to the shop. Change it for something decent." The following day both the Irish Times and the Evening Herald ran a front-page picture of the Tara and Lisa clinch. 17 At quarter to seven on Saturday morning, Clodagh was woken by Molly. Head-butting her. "Wake up, wake up, wake up," she invited, fractiously. "Craig is making a cake." There were some benefits to having children, Clodagh thought wearily, dragging herself from the bed—for instance, she hadn't had to set an alarm clock for five years. She was meeting Ashling in town. They were going shopping because Ashling needed new clothes for work. "And I think we should start early," Ashling had said. "To miss the crowds." "How early?" "About ten." "Ten!" "Or eleven, if that's too early." "Too early? I'll have been awake for several hours by then." After she'd cleaned up the cake mess, Clodagh gave Craig a bowl of Rice Krispies, but he wouldn't eat them because she'd poured too much milk into the bowl. So she made him another bowl, this time getting the milk/ce-real ratio just right. Then she gave Molly a bowl of Sugar Puffs. As soon as Craig saw Molly's breakfast, he took violently against his Rice Krispies, declaring that they were poisonous. With much spoon-banging and milk-splashing, he loudly demanded Sugar Puffs instead. Clodagh wiped a splatter of milk from her cheek, opened her mouth to begin a speech

about how he'd made his choice and that he had to learn to live with it, then couldn't be bothered. Instead she picked up his bowl, tipped the contents into the bin, and grimly banged the box of Sugar Puffs down in front of him. Craig's delight dimmed. He didn't really want them now. Getting them had been too easy, yet not quite right. As Clodagh tried to get ready for her trip into town, they obviously sensed she was trying to make her escape. They were more clingy and demanding than usual, and when she got into the shower, they both insisted on accompanying her. "Remember the days when I was the one who used to get into the shower with you?" Dylan observed wryly when she emerged, trying to dry herself, children hanging out of her. "Yees," she said, nervously. She didn't want him remembering how raunchy their sex life used to be. In case he asked for his money back. Or worse still, tried to reactivate things. "Here, dry her." She pushed Molly toward him. "I'm in a hurry." And as Clodagh reversed her Nissan Micra out of the drive, Molly stood at the front door and bawled, "I want to go!" with such agony that several of the neighbors rushed to their windows to see who was being murdered. "So do I!" Craig screeched in harmony. "Come back, oh Mummy, come back." Contrary little bastards, Clodagh thought as she sped down the road. They spent most of the week telling her that they hated her, that they wanted their daddy, then the minute she tried to have a couple of hours for herself, she suddenly became the flavor of the month. At quarter past ten both Ashling and Clodagh turned up outside the Stephen's Green Centre. Neither of them apologized for being late. Because they weren't. Not by Irish standards. "What's wrong with your eye?" Ashling asked. "You're like your man out of A Clockwork Orange." In alarm, Clodagh scrambled to get a mirror from her bag. One of Molly's yogurts fell out. "Here." Ashling had beaten her to it with the mirror. "It's my makeup," Clodagh realized, surveying herself. "I've only done one eye. When Craig saw me putting on my slap, he made me do his and I must have just forgotten to finish mine...You'd think Dylan would have told me!" At the mention of Dylan, Ashling felt awkward. She was due to meet him on Monday night for the quick drink he'd requested, and for some reason she felt funny about mentioning it to Clodagh. And funny about keeping it from her, too. But until she knew what it was about she sensed it was better to keep her mouth shut. Maybe Dylan was planning a surprise holiday for Clodagh—it wouldn't be the first time. "I have some stuff." Ashling fished a mascara and eyeliner from her bag. "Your tardis." Clodagh laughed. "Hey! Chanel mascara? I mean, Chanel?" Ashling beamed with embarrassed pride. "It's my new job, you see. I got it free." For a moment Clodagh couldn't move. She swallowed and it sounded very loud to her. "Free? How?" As Ashling launched into a

garbled story of how someone called Mercedes was off in Donegal and how someone else called Lisa had gone to a charity lunch to bond with posh Dublin people and how someone else called Trix looked too like Gwen Stefani to be allowed out, so Ashling had to represent Colleen at the Chanel Face of Autumn. "And they gave me a goody bag when I left." "That's brilliant," Clodagh said hollowly. And she looked at Ashling's happy delighted smile and of course it was brilliant. But where had all the promise of her own life leaked away to? "Come on, let's burn plastic," Ashling urged. "Where'll we start?" "Jigsaw. My magic lose-ten-pounds-in-an-instant trousers have gone a bit bobbly on me and I'm hoping to replace them. Although I don't give much for my chances," she admitted gloomily. "Why? Horoscope not good today?" Clodagh teased. "Actually, smarty pants, it wasn't bad, but that makes no difference. The minute I find something I like, they rush around and take them off all the hangers. Next thing you know the line is discontinued!" In shop after shop, as Ashling tried on pair after pair of very disappointing trousers, Clodagh wandered through a parallel universe of clothes. She couldn't imagine wearing any of them. "Look at how short these dresses are!" she exclaimed, then clutched herself. Did I just say that? "That's good, coming from the woman who once wore a pillowcase as a skirt." "Did I?" "Oh, they're not dresses anyway." Ashling had just noticed what Clodagh had been looking at. "They're tunics. To wear over trousers." "I'm completely out of touch," Clodagh said forlornly. "But it happens without your noticing and suddenly what you look for in a garment is how well it hides puke stains. "Look at the cut of me." She sighed, indicating her black flares and denim jacket. Ashling twisted her mouth wryly. Clodagh mightn't be a fashion queen, but she'd still give anything to look like her—her legs short and shapely, her small waist emphasized by her fitted jacket, her long thick hair wound casually on top of her head. "See that color green?" Clodagh pounced on a pale-mint top. "Well, can you imagine that in a blue?" "Um, yeh," Ashling lied. She suspected this had something to do with decorating. "That's the exact color we're getting the front room papered in." Clodagh glowed. "They're coming on Monday and I can't wait." "Already? That was quick. It's only a couple of weeks since you first started talking about it." "I decided to just go for it. That awful terra-cotta's been bugging the life out of me, so I told the decorators it was an emergency." "I thought the terra-cotta was beautiful," Ashling opined. So had Clodagh not so long ago. "Well, it's not," Clodagh said firmly, and turned her attention back to clothes, determined to get a handle on them. Eventually she bought a tiny slip dress from Oasis, so short and see-through that Ashling thought even Trix might balk at it—and you don't get too many of them to the pound! "When will you wear

it?" Ashling inquired curiously. "Dunno. Bringing Molly to play group, collecting Craig from painting. Look, I just want it, okay?" Defiantly she paid with a credit card that declared her to be Mrs. Clodagh Kelly. Ashling experienced a pang—and she could only presume she was jealous. Clodagh earned no money of her own, yet she always had plenty. Wouldn't it be lovely to live her life? Off they set again. "Oh, look at those little dungarees!" Clodagh declared, diving in off the street to a chichi children's shop. "They'd be dotie on Molly. And wouldn't this baseball cap be gorgeous on Craig?" Only when Clodagh had spent more on each of her children than she had on herself did she feel better about buying a dress she would never wear. "Will we go for coffee?" Ashling suggested, when the spending frenzy ended. Clodagh hesitated. "I'd rather go for a drink." "It's only twelve." "I'm sure some places open at ten." That hadn't actually been what Ashling had meant, but whatever. So while Dublin basked in unexpected weekend sunshine, drinking double skinny mocha lattès and pretending to be in Los Angeles, Ashling and Clodagh sat in a gloomy, old men's pub, where the rest of the clientele looked like a government health warning against the dangers of the demon drink. Not an unbroken vein between them. Ashling chattered excitedly about her new job, about the famous people she'd nearly met, about the free T-shirt she got from Morocco, and Clodagh's spirits slid into the bottom of her gin and tonic. "Maybe I should get a job," she suddenly interrupted. "I always meant to go back to work after Craig." "That's right, you did." Ashling knew Clodagh was vaguely defensive that she wasn't one of those superwomen who did a full-time job as well as rearing children. "But the exhaustion had been beyond belief," Clodagh insisted. "Whatever about the agony of labor, nothing prepares you for the hell of sleepless nights. I was forever shattered and waking up was like coming 'round from an anesthetic. I couldn't have held down a job." And luckily Dylan's computer business was doing well enough that she didn't have to. "Do you have time now for a job?" Ashling asked. "I am very busy," Clodagh acknowledged. "Apart from a couple of hours when I go to the gym, I never have a moment to myself. Mind you, it's all inconsequential stuff, changing clothes that've been puked on or having to watch Barney video after Barney video. "Although," she said, with a glint in her eye, "I've put an end to Barney." "How?" "I've told Molly that he's dead." Ashling roared laughing. "Told her he'd been knocked down by a lorry," Clodagh continued grimly. Ashling's smile faded. "You didn't ...really?" "I did, really," Clodagh said smartly. "I'd had quite enough of that big purple fucker and all those awful irritating brats, delivering morals and telling me how to live my life." "And was Molly upset?" "She'll get over it. Shit happens. Am I right?" "But...but... she's two



and a half.” “I’m a person, too,” Clodagh said defensively. “I have rights, too. And I was going mad from it, I swear I was.” Ashling considered in confusion. But maybe Clodagh was right. Everyone just expects mothers to sublimate everything of their own wants and needs for the good of their children. Perhaps that wasn’t very fair. “Sometimes”—Clodagh sighed, heavily—“I just wonder, what’s the point? My day is filled with ferrying Craig to school, Molly to play group, Molly home from play group, Craig to his origami lessons, Molly to the mother-and-toddler group... I’m a slave.” “But bringing up kids is the most important job anyone can do,” Ashling protested. “But I never have any adult conversation. Except with other mothers, and then it’s all so competitive. You know the sort of thing—‘My Andrew is much more violent than your Craig.’ Craig never hits anyone, while Andrew bloody Higgins is a junior Rambo. It’s so humiliating!” She fixed Ashling with a bleak look. “I see magazine articles about the competitiveness of the workplace, but it’s nothing compared to what takes place in the mother and toddler group.” “If it’s any consolation, I’ve been worried sick for this week because I’ve to write an article on a salsa class,” Ashling provided. “It’s literally kept me awake at night. You don’t have to deal with that kind of worry.” To finally bring her around, Ashling finished softly, “And above all, you have Dylan.” “Ah now, marriage isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.” Ashling wasn’t convinced. “I know you have to say that. It’s the rule, I’ve seen it in action. Married women simply aren’t allowed to say that they’re mad about their husband, unless they’re just married. Get a group of married women together and they compete to see who can diss their husbands the most. ‘My one leaves his dirty socks on the floor. Well, my one never noticed that I got my hair cut.’ I think you’re all just embarrassed by your good fortune!” Back out on the sunlit street, Ashling heard a familiar voice shout, “Salman Rushdie, Jeffrey Archer, or James Joyce?” It was Joy. “What are you doing up so early?” “Haven’t been to bed yet. Hiya.” Joy nodded warily at Clodagh. Clodagh and Joy didn’t really like each other. Joy thought Clodagh was too spoiled and Clodagh resented Joy for her closeness with Ashling. “Go on, then,” Joy urged. “Salman Rushdie, Jeffrey Archer, or James Joyce?” “James Joyce alive or decomposing?” “Decomposing.” Ashling considered her gruesome choice and Clodagh’s face was a picture of left-out-ness. “James Joyce,” Ashling finally decided. “Right, you cow. Gerry Adams, Tony Blair, or Prince Charles?” Joy winced. “Ooooh! Well obviously not Tony Blair. And not Prince Charles. It’s going to have to be number one.” Ashling turned to Clodagh. “Your turn.” “What do I do?” “You pick three horrible men and we have to choose which one we sleep with.” Clodagh hesitated. “Why?” Ashling and Joy glanced at each

other. Why indeed? "Because it's ...um... fun." "I have to go." Joy rescued the situation. "I'm afraid I'm going to die. See you later. What time are we going to the River Club?" "I said I'd meet Lisa there at nine."

"You have all these friends that I don't know." Clodagh stared resentfully after her. "Her, and that Ted. I'm buried alive." "Well, why don't you come out with us? I keep inviting you." "I could, couldn't I? Dylan can bloody well baby-sit for a change." "Or Dylan could come, too." 18 Ashling had been wrong—Marcus Valentine didn't ring her. She could hardly believe her luck. All week her answering machine had crouched in her flat with the menace of an unexploded bomb. If she came in from work and the light was flashing red, her heart leaped into her mouth. But, though there was a message from Cormac saying that a bin for the dead branches would be delivered on Tuesday and another message that it would be collected on Friday, there was not a word from Marcus Valentine. By Saturday evening, when she got home from her day's shopping with Clodagh, she knew there wouldn't be. But as she painted her fingernails (and a fair portion of her surrounding fingers also) light blue in honor of the gig at the River Club, she realized there was a small chance Marcus would notice her in the audience. She hoped he wouldn't, she really hoped he wouldn't. The spoils from her day's shopping were spread out on her bed—light blue three-quarter-length trousers, killer sandals, white waist-tied shirt. Maybe she shouldn't wear them tonight—after such a lucky escape wouldn't it be foolhardy to look nice? But she'd only be cutting off her nose to spite her face. There'd be other people there; she had to think about them. Around nine o'clock, Ted and Joy showed up. Joy complimented Ashling on her funky pastel glamour, but Ted was agitatedly whispering, "My owl has got no wife. Shit, that's wrong! My wife has got no nose. No! Shit, shit, shit! "We might as well stay at home," he said tearfully. "I'm going to be atrocious. People have expectations of me now. It was different when I didn't have a following. My owl has got no nose..." Already Ashling was plopping a drop of rescue remedy on his tongue, rubbing lavender oil on his temples, and shoving the Serenity Prayer under his nose. "Read that, and if it doesn't do the trick, we'll move on to the Desiderata." "Bring me the lucky Buddha," he hyperventilated from the couch. "How's Half-Man-Half-Badger?" Ashling asked Joy as they hefted the statue to Ted. "Mick is fine." Things must be serious if Joy was now calling Half-Man-Half-Badger by his real name. Next they'd be visiting garden centers together. Ted perked up after he'd polished the lucky Buddha, located a comforting tarot card, and had his horoscope read to him. (Ashling read out Aries even though Ted was a Scorpio,

because Scorpio wasn't looking so hot.) "Now, the pair of you are to be on your best behavior tonight," Ashling warned. "You're to be very nice to Lisa." "She needn't think she'll be getting any special treatment from me," Joy said defensively. "Is she a total bitch?" asked Ted. "Not as such." Not always, in any case. "But she's tricky. The trickiest of tricky biscuits. Let's go." Looking their very best, the three of them clattered and chattered down the stairs. Buoyed up by that bright Saturday night sensation of standing right on the very fringe of their future. The exhilarating anticipation that the rest of their life was ripe to reveal itself. The homeless boy was sitting on the pavement outside, with his ever-present orange blanket, which wasn't very orange anymore. Ashling ducked her head—every time she saw him she felt obliged to give him a pound and she was beginning to resent it. Then she snuck a glance at him and he wasn't even looking, he was reading a book. "Hold it, lads, I just want to..." She trotted back to him. "Howya!" He looked up, pleasantly surprised, as if they were old friends who hadn't met for ages. "You're looking well. Off out?" "Er, yes." She held out a pound, which he didn't take. "Where to?" "Comedy gig." "Nice." He nodded, as if he was at comedy gigs all the time. "Who?" "Someone called Marcus Valentine." "I've heard he's very funny." He finally made eye contact with the coin in her hand. "Would put that away, Ash-ling. I don't want you tipping me every time you see me. You'll be afraid to come out of your flat." Ashling neighed with nervous laughter. Most times as she came down the stairs lately, she was praying fervently that he wouldn't be there. "How do you know my name?" she asked, almost flattered. "Don't know. I must have heard your pals saying it." Ashling plunged into silence as something bizarre occurred to her. She finally voiced it. "What's your name?" "My friends call me Boo." He grinned up at her. "Pleased to meet you, Boo," she said automatically, and before she knew what was happening, he'd stuck up his grubby hand and she was shaking it. The book facedownward on his lap was *An Encyclopedia of Mushrooms*. "Why are you reading that?" She was astonished. "I've nothing else." She had to run to catch up with Joy and Ted. "Another of Ashling's waifs," Ted observed archly, the neediness he'd displayed not ten minutes earlier completely forgotten. "Ah shut up." Imagine having to spend Saturday night begging on a cold street, reading a book about mushrooms.

19 Lisa had hoped to make some progress with Jack by getting him along to the comedy gig. It would have been a great chance to socialize with him, under the pretext of work. But she never got an opportunity to casually suggest it because a crisis had erupted at the television station—a regular occurrence, apparently—and he'd been

out of the office troubleshooting all day Thursday and Friday. This also meant that she'd missed out on being praised by him for getting her picture in the paper and generating a little advance publicity for Colleen. It pissed her off. On Saturday, she'd managed to fill her day buying things for her "new" house. She'd moved in the previous night and was keen to dilute the effect of all that pine. Besides, there was nothing like being busy to keep her one step ahead of herself. Though like everything else in this horrible country, the interiors shops were pitifully, depressingly bad. No one had heard of Japanese rice-paper blinds, pocketed shower curtains, or cupboard handles in the shape of glass flowers. She'd managed to track down decent ecru bed linens, but not in the size she needed and it would take forever to order because they had to import it from England. Then she got "home" and had to wait half an hour for the water to heat up for her shower. So much for Jack saying he'd sort out the timer for her. Men. They were all alike, all mouth and trousers. And sometimes not even trousers. Sour and resentful after her alarmingly disappointing day, she was nevertheless pleased to be going out on the trail of Marcus Valentine. At least she was doing something constructive. Since the bad news about the advertising situation, the need to get brilliant columns for Colleen had greatly intensified. Shortly after nine, she arrived at the River Club. Like everything else in Ireland, it was a disappointment, smaller and scruffier than she'd expected. K-Bar, it wasn't. She hadn't been sure if she'd get a chance to buttonhole Marcus Valentine, but just in case, she'd worn her I'm-a-regular-girl-and-not-a-scary-magazine-bitch-at-all outfit. Frayed, embroidered jeans, slip-on trainers, slashed-neck T-shirt. Though her makeup was plentiful, it was subtle to the point of invisible. She looked young, pretty, and approachable, as if she'd just thrown on the first things that came to hand, and not as though she'd spent an hour staring into her (pine) mirror carefully calculating the effect she was making. She scouted around the milling bar for Ashling and her mates, but no sign, so she went to the bar and ordered an apple martini. That was the ultrafashionable drink quaffed at K-Bar and Chinawhite and all the other red-hot watering holes she used to frequent in London. "A what?" asked the round, red-faced barman, bursting out of his nylon shirt. "An apple martini." "I dunno what that is." Lisa wondered if she should give him instructions on how to make it, then realized she didn't know. "A glass of white wine," she snapped irritably. Perhaps they wouldn't even have that. She'd have to drink that disgusting Guinness. "Chablis or Chardonnay?" "Oh. Ah. Chardonnay." She lit a cigarette and scanned the throng. By the time she'd finished the cigarette and glass of wine, Ashling still hadn't appeared. Perhaps her watch was wrong. Lisa saw a group of lads standing nearby, selected

the best-looking one, and asked, "What time is it?" "Twenty past nine." "Twenty past?" It was worse than she'd thought. "Been stood up?" "No! But the arrangement was for nine." The boy heard her accent. "You're English?" She nodded. "They'll be here soon enough. Definitely before ten. But you see, 'round here, nine o'clock is only a figure of speech." Lisa felt her black demon stir. This fucking country. She fucking hated it. "But we'll talk to you until they come," he offered with a gallant smile. He stuck his fingers in his mouth, gave a piercing wolf whistle, and beckoned back the friends who'd drifted away. "No need . . ." Lisa attempted. "No bother," he assured her. "Lads," he told his five pals. "This is—" He flourished his hand at Lisa, waiting for her name. "Lisa," she said sulkily. "She's from England. Her friends are late and she feels like a thick standing on her own." "Well, stick with us," a small, ferrety boy urged. "Get her a drink there, Declan." "Irish hospitality," Lisa muttered contemptuously. The six boys nodded with enthusiasm, though if they were honest, it was nothing to do with legendary Irish hospitality and everything to do with Lisa's caramel hair, slender hips, and long, smooth brown shins sticking out of the end of her artfully ragged jeans. If Lisa had been a man, she'd be staring into her pint, completely ignored. "Deal's off, here she is." In relief, Lisa saw Ashling coming through the door. As soon as Ashling saw Lisa, the glory of her new clothes disappeared and she felt lumpish and diminished. Nervously she introduced Joy and Ted, then to Ashling's horror, Joy turned to Lisa and said, her chin tilted challengingly, "Jim Davidson, Bernard Manning, or Jimmy Tarbuck—and you must sleep with one of them." "Jo-oy!" Ashling shoved her. "Lisa's my boss." But Lisa got it immediately. She went into thoughtful mode and after detailed consideration, said, "Jim Davidson. Now, let me see. Des O'Connor..." This took Joy aback no end. ". . . Frank Carson, or...or... Chubby Brown." Lisa's eyes were narrowed with glee and malice as Joy flinched. After some thought, Joy sighed heavily, "Des O'Con-nor, then. "She's not so bad," Joy muttered to Ashling as they bagged some seats. Ted was on first, and although it was only his third public appearance, there was a crowd of people already firmly on his bandwagon. His earlier emotional episode in Ashling's flat had been quite unnecessary. When he opened his act by shouting into the audience, "My owl has gone to the West Indies," a hard core of about six studenty types yelled back, "Jamaica?" "No," Ted replied, and several people chorused along with the rest of the answer, "she went of her own accord." Ted had added loads of new owl stuff, all of which was a big hit. "What do you call a funny owl? A Hoot! "What do you call a stupid owl? A Te-wit! "What do you call a stupid owl who's coming on to a girl who isn't into him? A Te-wit to woo! "Now for some political stuff. How come George

Dubya is president when he had fewer owls than the other guy?” Though most of the room was in kinks of laughter, Lisa saw straight through Ted. “I know he’s your friend, but this is a clear case of the emperor’s new Hugo Boss suit,” she said, scathingly. “He’s only doing it to get a girlfriend,” Ashling explained humbly. “Perhaps that’s all right, then.” Lisa knew about the end justifying the means. There were two other comedians on after Ted, then it was Marcus Valentine’s turn. The chemical makeup of the air seemed to alter, becoming charged with piquant anticipation. When he finally took the stage the audience went hysterical. Ashling and Lisa both sat up and paid attention, but each for very different reasons. For a male stand-up, Marcus Valentine was a strange sort of beast. His act contained no references to masturbating, hangovers, or Eminem. Most irregular. Instead his skill was being A Man Perplexed by Modern Life. The kind of person who pops into a supermarket because he’s run out of butter and goes into a tailspin because he can’t decide between spreadable butter, unsaturated butter, polyunsaturated butter, salted butter, unsalted butter, reduced-fat butter, low-fat butter, stuff that wasn’t butter at all and was only pretending to be. He was charming and likable, in a freckly kind of way. Baffled and vulnerable. And he had a very nice body. Ashling cataloged all this in alarm. Hastily she enumerated the reasons she’d rejected Marcus Valentine. One—his enthusiasm. There was nothing sexy about bright eyes and lack of cynicism. Sad, but true. Two—his freckles. Three—his keenness on her. Four—his stupid name. But as she stared up at him, long-legged and broad-chested, she realized she was in mortal danger of falling foul of the man-on-a-stage rule. Coupled with the fact that he’d said he’d ring her and hadn’t. It was a fatal combination. I’m not going to do this, she told herself, I’m just not going to do this . . . The mental equivalent of sticking her fingers in her ears and going, “LALALALA I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you...” “Snowflakes!” Marcus declared, his eyes wide and guileless as he scanned the room. “They say that no two are alike.” He let a pause build, then bellowed, “But how do they know?” As people writhed with hilarity, he asked in bewilderment, “Have they compared each of them? Have they checked?” Then he moved on to his next piece. “There was a young lady I wanted to ask out,” Marcus told his besotted audience. Maybe that’s me? Ashling found herself wondering. He strolled across the stage, as if deep in thought. The overhead lights hit the hard planes of his thighs. “But the last time I asked a young lady for her phone number, she said, ‘It’s in the book.’ The problem was I didn’t know her name, and when I asked her, she said . . .” He paused and with impeccable timing went on, “‘Oh, that’s in the book, too.’” The venue erupted, but the laughter was sympathetic and of the at-least-it’s-not-just-me type. “So I decided I’d

act a bit cool.” He gave a klutzy grin and everyone melted. “Thought I’d model myself on Austin Powers and ask the young lady to call me. So I wrote my name and number on a bit of paper and then I asked myself what would Austin Powers say.” He closed his eyes and held his fingertips to his temples, to show that he was communing with Austin Powers. “And suddenly I knew. Bellez-moi!” Marcus declared. “Suave, slick, sophisticated. What woman could resist? Bellez-moi!” I’m famous. Ashling had an hysterical urge to stand up and tell everyone. “And guess what?” Marcus scanned the audience with a cute, goofy expression. His connection with each person was taut. They strained toward him, full of love, as he stretched the anticipatory silence to its farthest reach, holding his public in the palm of his freckly hand. “She never rang!” No doubt about it, Marcus Valentine had loser star quality. Lisa was out of her seat the minute he left the stage. He’d already refused to have lunch with her when Trix had rung his agent, but she hoped that extreme flattery and herself in person would change his mind. Ashling watched her block him off at the edge of the stage and wondered if she should follow. She didn’t want to get too near to Marcus, in case he saw her. In case he thought... But Ted was besieged by fans and Joy had just seen Half-Man-Ha... Mick talking to another woman and had gone to investigate. After sitting alone for a while longer, Ashling got up. With curiosity, she watched Marcus watching Lisa as she did her pitch. His head was to one side and he had a perplexed, quirky way of turning down his mouth that was delightful. Then Lisa stopped talking and he began. He was in the middle of something that looked very like a refusal, when his eye snagged Ashling’s and he stopped abruptly. “Hi,” he mouthed, and gave her a huge smile, holding her eyes, projecting warmth. As if we have some understanding, Ashling thought uncomfortably. He thinks I came here specially to see him. He continued talking for a short time longer, but kept sneaking looks, then touched Lisa’s arm in valediction and came over. “Hello again.” “Hello.” “What are you doing here?” She paused, looked up from under her lashes, and smiled. “I thought Macy Gray was playing.” Fuck! she realized. I’m flirting with him. His laugh was appreciative. “Did you enjoy the show?” “Uh-huh.” She nodded and did that eyelash look again. “Will you let me take you out for a drink sometime?” Now that would teach her. She was like a rabbit caught in headlights, who’d bitten off more than she could chew. As it were. I can’t fancy him just because he’s famous and admired. That would make me very shallow. “Okay.” Her voice had decided to go on ahead without her. “Call me.” “Your number...?” “You have it.” “Give it to me again to be on the safe side.” Marcus began an elaborate pantomime of patting himself, vaguely seeking a pen and paper. Luckily, Ashling had the equivalent of a small

stationery cupboard in her bag. She scribbled her name and phone number on a small page torn from a notebook. "I'll treasure this," he said, folding it small and shoving it deep into the front pocket of his jeans. "Next to my heart," he promised, in a tone dense with innuendo. "I'm leaving now, but I'll be in touch." Confused with herself, Ashling watched him leave. Then, aware that Lisa was looking at her with amusement, escaped to the ladies'. Where her path to the basin was blocked by a small girl with tragic eyes who was standing in front of the mirror, renewing her eyeliner and making herself look even more tragic. As Ashling turned the tap on, the tragic girl turned to her taller friend, who was idly doing circle after circle of jammy pink lip gloss on her mouth, and said, "Frances, you'll never believe it, but that was me, you know." "What was?" "The girl who Marcus Valentine gave that Bellez-moi note to." Ashling jerked violently, hooshing water down her front. No one noticed. Frances did a slow, incredulous body turn, her lip-gloss applicator frozen against her mouth. Her tragic friend elaborated, "It was last Christmas, we stood next to each other for two hours in a taxi queue." "But why didn't you bellez him?" Frances levered her lip-gloss wand away from her mouth and vigorously shook the tragic girl by the shoulders. "He's yummy. Yummy!" "I just thought he was some freckly eejit." Frances surveyed the shorter girl for a long, thoughtful time before delivering judgment. "Do you know something, Linda O'Neill, you deserve your unhappiness, you really do. I'll never feel sorry for you again." Ashling, still washing her hands like someone in the terminal stages of obsessive compulsive disorder, was mesmerized. She spent her entire life looking for Signs, and if this wasn't a Sign, then she didn't know what was.

Give it a lash with Marcus Valentine, the celestial oracle was urging her. Even if he was handing out Bellez-moi notes like they were flyers, she had a good feeling about this. A very good feeling. When Ashling reemerged, Lisa was about to leave. Now that she'd gotten what she wanted, she saw no reason to hang around this low-rent club any longer. "Bye, then. See you at work on Monday," Ashling said, awkwardly, not sure how chummy she should be. Lisa wiggled through the crowds, her face satisfied. Not a bad night's work. Seeing Marcus Valentine had convinced her that he was certainly worth pursuing. Though it wouldn't be easy. He wasn't half as guileless in real life. In fact, he was smart—and slippery. Lisa suspected he had no objection to writing a column per se, but that he was holding out for a quality newspaper. To combat which she could feed him some bollocks about possibly syndicating his column to Randolph Media publications worldwide. And there was that surprise twist—he seemed



to fancy Ashling. Between both women, they could launch a pincer approach. The column was as good as in the bag. But best to move fast and get it all sown up before he dumped Ashling. Because he would dump Ashling. Lisa knew his type of old. Catapult a nondescript man to a form of stardom and he can't help availing himself of the extracurricular girls. It could get messy—Ashling seemed like one of those pathetic women who took heartbreak hard and the last thing Lisa needed at this busy time was an assistant editor going off the rails. She couldn't understand weak people who cracked up. It was the sort of thing she'd never do. Of course, this was all based on the assumption that Ashling would go out with Marcus. Perhaps she wouldn't, and who could blame her? In Lisa's opinion, he was gross. Those freckles! And making a roomful of pissed people laugh did not cancel them out. "Lisaaa, see yaaa. Bye, Lisaaa." The lads who'd "minded" Lisa at the beginning were waving to her. "Bye." To her surprise, she smiled. At the door, she passed Joy, deep in argument with a man with a white streak through the front of his long, black hair. On a wild whim Lisa whispered as she passed, "Robin Williams, Mike Myers, or Woody Allen, and you must sleep with one of them." Joy whirled around, but Lisa was headed for home. As she strode through the streets, she was aware that there had been something about tonight. She had felt...it had been... Suddenly she knew. Fun! It had been fun. 20 Lisa woke up the next morning and felt that she couldn't go on. Just like that. She'd never felt so hopeless. Even in the terrible, ugly dying days with Oliver she hadn't felt so full of despair—back then she'd flung herself into her work, taking bitter comfort that one area of her life was still working. The thing was that Lisa didn't really hold with depression as a concept. Depression was a feeling other people got when their lives were insufficiently fabulous. Same as loneliness. Or sadness. But if you had enough nice shoes and ate in enough amazing restaurants and had been promoted over someone who deserved it more than you, there was no need to feel bad. That was the theory, in any case. But as she lay in bed she was shocked by the extent of her depression. She blamed the curtains and the plethora of pine—it was enough to send any style-conscious person over the edge. She hated the stillness beyond the gauzy light of the room. Fucking garden, she thought savagely. What she wanted was the purr of taxis, the slamming of car doors, the sounds of well-dressed people coming and going. She wanted life outside her window. She had a hangover from the night before—she'd lost count of the number of white wines she'd had and ensuring that every second drink is a mineral water tends to lose its benefit when you're on your twentieth round. She blamed that Joy. But the real hangover was emotional. She'd enjoyed herself, had fun, and something had been triggered by

the high-spiritedness of the night before, because she just couldn't stop thinking about Oliver. She'd been doing so well until now. Always managing to block out thoughts of him in the last—she let herself count back—nearly five months. In fact, once she wasn't resisting thinking about it, she actually knew how many days it had been. One hundred and forty-five. It's easy to keep track when someone chooses New Year's Day to leave you. Not that she'd done much to persuade him to stay. Too proud. And too pragmatic. She'd decided that their differences were irreconcilable. There were some things that she wouldn't—couldn't—back down on. But on this terrible morning, all she could remember were the nice bits, the early days, bubbling with hope and love-to-be. She'd been working at Chic, and Oliver was a fashion photographer. On the Way Up. He'd bounce gracefully into the office, his little dreads flying, usually carrying an enormous kit bag, his bulging shoulder dwarfing it. Even when he was late for an appointment with the editor—in fact, especially then—he'd always stop for a chat with Lisa. "How was New York?" she asked, in one conversation. "Rubbish. I hate it." "Oh, really?" Everyone else seemed to love it, but Oliver never bought into the received wisdom. "And did you photograph any supermodels while you were there?" "Oh yes. Lots." "Yeah? Dish the dirt, then, what's Naomi like?" "Great sense of humor." "And Kate?" "Oh, Kate is very special." Though Lisa was disappointed that he didn't share insider stories of tantrums and heroin taking, the fact that he was impressed by no one impressed her very much. Even before you saw him, you always knew when he was in the office. He was perpetually surrounded by com-motion—complaining that they'd screwed up his expenses, protesting that they'd printed his beloved shots on too-cheap paper, arguing and laughing energetically. His voice was deep and would have been chocolaty-seductive, except he was too vibrant. When he laughed in public, people always turned to look. If they weren't already looking, that is. The beauty of his big, hard body coupled so incongruously with his rippling grace was dizzying. When he used to come into the office, Lisa would study him discreetly. Everything gleamed—his skin, his teeth, his hair. Not to mention sweat on the editor's brow. What sort of fuss was he going to kick up today? Though he was still making a name for himself, he was honest, opinionated, and difficult. He never crawled to anyone, and when people pissed him off, he let them know. It was this confidence, as much as his beauty, that made Lisa decide she wanted him. That his star was very much in the ascendant didn't hurt either, of course. Since she'd first started going out with boys, Lisa had always dated strategically. She just wasn't the type of girl who went out with an insurance clerk. Not that it ever felt quite that cold-blooded. She never made herself go out with a well-

connected man whom she didn't like. Hardly ever, anyway. But she had to admit there were men she fancied whom she knew she'd never take seriously: a charmingly grave court clerk by the name of Frederick Dave, the sweetest plumber, and—the most unsuitable of all—a sparky petty criminal called Baz. (At least that was the name he told Lisa, but there was no guarantee it was his real one.) Occasionally she allowed herself a little treat, and had a quick fling with one of these gorgeous no-hopers, but never made the mistake of thinking there was any future in them. They were human Milky Ways—the man you can eat between meals without ruining your appetite. Her real relationships were with a different caliber of men. A dynamic magazine executive—it was this romance that led to her getting her first job on Sweet Sixteen. An Angry Young Man novelist, who ditched her rather nastily, and whose novels she subsequently ensured got vitriolic reviews. (And made him even angrier than he already was.) A controversial music journalist, whom she was mad about until he discovered acid jazz and grew a goatee. Oliver straddled the two categories of men. He was beautiful enough to belong in the first, but talented and stylish enough to hold his own in the second. With every visit that Oliver made to Chic, the connection with Lisa intensified. She knew he liked and respected her, that their attraction was much, much more than physical. In those far-off days, not everyone she worked with hated her, but the more she became Oliver's favorite, the more she became Most Loathed Colleague. Especially after she began doing special favors for him. When she tracked down four missing transparencies, Oliver had good-humoredly blasted the rest of Chic: "Listen up, you lot of useless tossers, this lady here is a genius. Why can't the rest of you be like her?" At that, a disgusted glance shot around the office like an electric current. Lisa might well have found the missing transparencies, but she'd done bugger all else for the previous two days. Lisa had been vaguely aware that Oliver had a girlfriend, but it came as no surprise when the news broke that he was once again single. She knew she was next in line. Though they flirted like mad with each other, they were never coy. Their solidarity was so obvious, it would have been disingenuous to deny it. So obvious was it that Flicka Dupont (assistant features editor), Edwina Harris (fashion junior), and Marina Booth (health and beauty editor) hatched a plot to cut her out of her share of a basket of free John Frieda shampoos, on the basis that she was getting enough perks. The expected day finally dawned when Oliver showed up at Chic, made straight for Lisa, and said, "Babes, can I take you for a drink Friday night?" She hesitated, about to play hard to get, then thought better of it. With a shaky laugh she exhaled, "Okay." "You were going to make me suffer, weren't you?" he exclaimed. "Muh-huh." She nodded solemnly. They

both screamed with laughter so loud that, three desks away, Flicka Dupont muttered, "Please!" and had to twiddle her finger in her ear to dislodge the ringing. Flicka later sniffed to Edwina, "I don't envy her." "Gosh, neither do I!" "He's a loose cannon." "A pain in the bum," Edwina agreed. They plunged into silence. "I'd quite like to have sex with him, though," Flicka eventually admitted. "Would you really?" Edwina had never been the sharpest knife in the drawer. On the appointed Friday night, Oliver and Lisa went for a drink. Then he took her for dinner, where they had such fun that afterward they went to a club and danced for hours. At three a.m. they went to his flat and had breathless, long-awaited sex, before snatching a few hours' sleep. The following morning they awoke in each other's arms. They spent the rest of the day in bed, talking, dozing, and intermittently savaging each other with passion. That evening, sated, they voluptuously rose from their lovers' nest and Oliver took her to a fairly crappy French restaurant, its only virtue that it was within walking distance. Lit by red candles stuck in wine bottles, they fed each other tasteless mussels and tough coq au vin. "It's the most delicious food I've ever tasted." Lisa licked her fingers and gazed across the table at him. On the way home, they got swept up into an Armenian wedding that was being held in the local church hall. "Come, come," an expansive man invited as they drifted past. "Celebrate my son's happiness." "But . . ." Lisa protested. This was no way for a style warrior such as herself to spend Saturday night! What if someone she knew saw her? But Oliver said easily, "Why not? Come on, Lees, might be fun." Drinks were pressed into their hands, and they sat in a bubble of dreamlike ease as all around, young and old in embroidered, flouncy peasant clothes danced strange polkalike jigs to shrill, speedy bazouki-style music. An old woman with a head scarf and a thick accent pinched Lisa's cheek affectionately, smiled from Oliver to her, and said, "In laff. So in laff." "Does she mean I am or you are?" Lisa asked anxiously, belatedly realizing that she might be wearing her heart on her sleeve too much. "You, lady." The old woman gave a gappy smile. "Naff off," Lisa muttered. Instantly Oliver exploded into laughter, his beautiful lips stretched around his row of strong, white teeth. "Touchy!" he teased. "Must be because you do love me." "Or maybe you love me," she replied huffily. "I never said I didn't," he replied. And though it wasn't the kind of thing she normally went around feeling, there, in the unexpectedness of that surreal, beautiful wedding party, Lisa felt as though they'd been touched by the hand of God. On Sunday morning, they'd awoken coiled around each other. Oliver bundled her into his car and belted up the motorway to Alton Towers, where they spent the day daring each other to go on ever-more-dangerous roller coasters. Even though she didn't want to, she went on the Nemesis

ride because she didn't want to show fear with him. And when she went a bit green and staggy he laughed and said, "Too much for you, babes?" To which she replied that she had an inner-ear disorder. Oliver challenged and interested her more than any man had ever done. He was like herself, only more so. Then they went home for pizza and bed. Their first date lasted sixty hours and ended when he dropped her off at work on the Monday morning. By their third excursion they were officially in love. On their fourth, Oliver decided to take her down to Purley to meet his mum and dad. Lisa thought it was a fantastically good sign, but as it happened, it was almost the undoing of them. The unraveling began when they'd been in the car about half an hour and Oliver remarked, "I'm not sure Dad will be home from work yet." "What does he do?" Lisa had never thought to ask before, it hadn't seemed important. "He's a doctor." A doctor! What kind of doctor? A doctor of road hygiene—in other words, a street sweeper? "Just a GP." The shock rendered her speechless. Here she'd been affectionately thinking of Oliver as a bit of rough, and it turned out that he'd been middle-class all along and she'd been the bit of rough. There was no way now that she could take him to meet her parents. For the rest of the drive, she hoped and prayed that, despite the dad being a doctor, they might be poor. But when Oliver drove up to a big, square house, the fake-Tudor lead-paned windows, the Laura Ashley Austrian blinds, and the plethora of knickknacks on the visible windowsills declared that they weren't exactly strapped for cash. As she answered the door, Oliver's mum looked like the Queen. A few shades darker, but with the helmet curls and Marks & Spencer's prim duds, all present and correct. "Pleased to meet you, dear." The accent was a little bit like the Queen, too, and Lisa felt her self-esteem wither even further. "Hello, Mrs. Livingstone." "Call me Rita. Do come through. Daddy's late at the surgery, but he should be here soon." They were led into the well-appointed sitting room, and when Lisa saw that the soft furnishings had had their plastic covering removed, it was the final blow. "Tea?" Rita suggested brightly, stroking the golden Labrador that had laid its head in her lap. "Lapsang suchong or Earl Grey?" "Don't mind," Lisa muttered. What was wrong with Lipton's? "This wasn't what I'd expected," Lisa couldn't stop herself from whispering when she and Oliver were alone. "What did you expect? Dat we be eatin' rice an' peas, drinkin' rum"—Oliver slipped into a perfect Caribbean accent—"an' dancin' to steel drums on de porch?" Exactly! It's the only reason I came. "I don't think so, my dear." He changed swiftly to BBC wartime speak. "For we are Brrrrritish!" "The correct name for us, so I'm told," Rita had reappeared with a tray, containing a plate of unsweet, no-fun, handmade biscuits, "is 'Bounties.' Or 'Chocices.'" "Wh-why?" Lisa was

confused. "Brown on the outside, white on the inside." She flashed a sudden, melon grin. "That's what my family call us. And you can't win because the white neighbors hate us, too! Next-door told me that the value of their house has gone down by ten grand since we moved in." Unexpectedly, totally at odds with her M&S appearance, she gave a high-pitched laugh. "Heee. Heee. Heee." And Lisa felt the chip on her shoulder dissolve like the sugar she didn't take in her tea. Well, so long as the neighbors hated them, that was all right, then, wasn't it? They weren't half as scary now. On their fifth date Oliver and Lisa talked about moving in together. They explored the notion further on the sixth. Their seventh date consisted of driving a van from Battersea to West Hampstead and back again as they ferried Lisa's considerable wardrobe from her flat to his. "You're going to have to lose some of this kit, babes," he said in alarm. "Or else we're going to have to buy a bigger place." Perhaps, Lisa subsequently realized, even then there were signs that all was not as it should have been. But at the time, she was blind to them. Nothing had ever felt so right. She felt that he truly saw and accepted her, with all her ambition, energy, vision, and fear. She reckoned they were two of a kind. Young, keen, ambitious, succeeding against the odds.

Around then, the concept of a soul mate was a very fashionable one, recently imported from L.A. Lisa was now the proud possessor of one. Shortly after they got together, Lisa moved to *Femme* as deputy editor. This coincided with Oliver's becoming a red-hot property. Even though he wasn't always popular on a personal level—some people found him just that little bit too difficult—all the glossies were suddenly scrambling and competing against one another to use him. Oliver shared himself out equally among them all, until Lily Headly-Smythe promised to use one of his photos for the Christmas cover of *Panache*, then changed her mind. "She broke her word. I'll never work for *Panache* or Lily Headly-Smythe again," Oliver declared. "Until next time." Lisa laughed. "No." His face was serious. "Never." And he didn't, not even when Lily sent him an Irish wolfhound pup by way of an apology. Lisa was full of admiration. He was so strong-willed, so idealistic. But that was before his intractability was turned on her. She didn't like it so much then. 21 Ashling wasn't having such a fantastic Sunday either. She'd woke up bubbling with anticipation concerning Marcus Valentine. Curious and expectant, she felt gloriously ready—for a date, a bout of flirting, a dose of flattery. Very definitely something ... The morning was spent mooning around, encapsulated in warmth, her positive faculties on full alert. But as the

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